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President: Mr. Kerim ..... (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

In the absence of the President, Ms. Ataeva (Turkmenistan), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Agenda item 49 (*continued*)

Culture of peace

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/62/97 and A/62/337)

The Acting President: Before giving the floor to the first speaker, I would like to remind members that there are still 34 speakers remaining on the list. In order for us to exhaust the list by this afternoon I strongly appeal to speakers to make their statements as concise as possible.

I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, chairman of the delegation of the State of Qatar.

Mr. Al-Nasser (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to congratulate the President on his election to the presidency of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session and to wish him success in his mission. I also wish to welcome the convening of this important dialogue as it represents a reactivation of the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The dialogue is also a response to the appeals launched by the heads of State and Government at the conclusion of the 2005 World Summit that stressed the importance of respect for and understanding of religious and cultural diversity and the value of dialogue on interreligious cooperation.

I also wish to take the opportunity to express my deep appreciation to the principal sponsors of resolution 61/221, namely, Pakistan and the Philippines, and to the other sponsors, for their tireless efforts. Thanks to those efforts the idea of convening this important dialogue during the current session of the Assembly took shape in order to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among people of different religions, cultures and languages.

While all religions and cultures share a common set of human values, manifestations of fanaticism and religious and ethnic conflicts are on the rise and increasingly constitute a threat to sound relations between States. The State of Qatar was among the first countries to note in many regional and international forums the importance of drawing attention at all levels to the need to strengthen relations among peoples of different religious and ethnic backgrounds. In fact, the State of Qatar submitted to the international community proposals on how to address religious and cultural clashes among nations.

In that regard, I wish to recall one of the important proposals made by His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the Emir of the State of Qatar, during the round table organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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at the margins of the Millennium Summit in September 2000. Those proposals addressed ways to achieve the goal of strengthening relations among human groups at three levels. The first level consists of a purely scientific mechanism that includes experts in history, politics and sociology and aims to expose the root causes of the conflict between peoples and cultures. The second level targets opinion leaders in various fields of the media with a view to discovering the best ways to shed light on the impact of misconceptions and bad images that might be conveyed by media outlets about different cultural groups. The third level includes political leaders and government leaders who belong to different cultural groups, as they would be the most capable of uprooting tensions and reducing chances of clash.

In the context of promoting dialogue among Islam, Christianity and Judaism, the State of Qatar has not confined its role to launching initiatives; it has also begun transforming its initiatives and appeals on promoting interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding into action. The State of Qatar firmly believes in the significance of giving the utmost importance to the principle of interreligious dialogue among the three divine religions in an effort to find solid ground to build a world of peace and understanding.

That deep belief has been the driving force that pushed the wise leadership of the State of Qatar, in the person of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, to host in the city of Doha a series of international interreligious conferences in what has become an annual event and which we expect will strengthen dialogue and communication. That series began with the first Conference on Interreligious Dialogue, which was held in Doha in April 2003; the latest is the fifth Conference, which was held in May 2007. This series of meetings has resulted in an important initiative that established the Doha International Centre for Interreligious Dialogue, which, in turn, set up an international advisory board to guide the work of the Centre in order to bring the three divine religions closer together.

The State of Qatar believes that interreligious dialogue will have a positive impact on the dialogue among peoples and civilizations. That is the reason why our country has responded positively to the initiative of the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, His Excellency Mr. Kofi Annan, to establish the Alliance of Civilizations. The State of Qatar contributed to the work of the High-level Group on the Alliance, set up by Mr. Annan in 2005, through the important participation of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned, the wife of our Emir. The Group included a host of eminent leaders from the five regional groups and was tasked with developing a set of initiatives in the areas of education, youth and media in order to achieve the lofty goal of the Alliance: to bring peoples and cultures closer together to build peace and stability in a world weary of the scourge of war and religious and ideological conflict.

The State of Qatar will continue its support for national, regional and international efforts to promote dialogue and understanding among religions, cultures and peoples.

I wish to conclude my statement by recalling the words spoken by His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar at the opening session of the third Conference on Interreligious Dialogue, held in 2005, where His Highness stressed that

> "pursuing dialogue [would] win new adherents who believe that dialogue is more effective than bickering, and that communicating is more useful than keeping one's distance. Dialogue has become an urgent need to get rid of the burdens of yesterday and recognize the mistakes of today".

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Mona Juul, chairperson of the delegation of Norway.

Mrs. Juul (Norway): Today, the issue of religious and cultural identity is receiving more attention and is more central to global relations than ever before. Religion and culture define man and woman, and influence how we interact and relate to one another. Our right to freely choose our religion or belief is clearly stated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Still, the coexistence of diverse religions and cultures at times represents a challenge for societies and nations worldwide.

Religious and cultural identity has always been used to define the different sides in conflict situations. In recent years we have seen how religion has been used to promote and deepen several conflicts, both violent and non-violent. In most cases, the conflicts are

really power struggles over political issues rather than clashes based on religious differences.

However, religion and culture can play quite a different role. Religious and cultural leaders have stood up against wars and the use of violence. Religious and cultural leaders as well as non-governmental organizations can play important roles in enhancing tolerance and promoting respect for religious and cultural diversity. They can make valuable contributions to peace and justice. In more secular societies there is often a tendency to underestimate that potential. It is therefore encouraging that national Governments and the United Nations, through high-level meetings such as this one, seek to involve those communities in order to better understand and deal with the role of religion and culture in national and international politics. We need international arenas such as this forum, where religious, cultural and political leaders can meet and exchange views.

Norway believes in the potential of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Through dialogue we can enhance mutual understanding and respect for freedom of religion and belief and for cultural diversity. Dialogue can have a considerable impact. It represents a possibility to seize the middle ground, and to challenge the dominance of the extremes.

When receiving the Path to Peace Foundation award, Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa said,

> "Promoting a true dialogue among civilizations and religions is perhaps the most important political instrument that we can use to reach out across borders and build bridges of peace and hope."

For the same reason, Norway is initiating, supporting and encouraging dialogue projects in several countries. Through those projects, we work closely with religious leaders in Norway and internationally.

Moreover, we have established a forum in our Ministry of Foreign Affairs where religious leaders, academics and diplomats meet to discuss important issues related to religion and foreign policy. It is a very valuable arena for the Ministry, the religious communities, the non-governmental organizations and the research institutes alike.

Although dialogue is the most important path to greater tolerance, respect for diversity and common understanding, dialogue is rarely without obstacles. Dialogue may also challenge decision-makers and religious leaders. Respect, acceptance and appreciation of cultures, traditions and religions must be mutual in order for dialogue to take place. Without fundamental respect for differences and recognition of the human dignity of the other, there can be no true dialogue. Basically, this means that we must be willing to both talk and listen. We must acknowledge that our dialogue partner has insights, convictions, values and abilities that could potentially make us reconsider our positions.

Fundamental respect for diversity is indeed a prerequisite for dialogue. And of course, increased respect for differences may also be a result of dialogue. It is important to underline that respect for cultural and religious diversity should not be misconstrued as uncritical acceptance of all facets of religion and culture. Both religious and cultural values can be used and misused; they can serve both good and bad purposes. There is often a need to identify elements in a dialogue process that could obstruct the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect. It is necessary to balance respect for each other's viewpoints with an open and sometimes critical approach to issues relating to culture and religion. This is often challenging, and striking the right balance will continue to be essential in efforts for dialogue.

Many speak as if there is an ongoing conflict between the so-called Muslim and Western worlds. We do not think that there is such a conflict; nor do we think that those are the right names for them. The discourse has been polarized and is too often dominated by extreme elements. This approach, however, prevents us from engaging in fruitful discussions, making it more difficult to find middle ground. Constructive dialogues must necessarily involve people and communities from different segments of society.

It is also important to keep in mind that dialogue takes time. It takes time to build the necessary knowledge, trust and confidence to change our own perceptions and those of the other party. The time perspective is not always compatible with national and international political demands for quick and durable results. Thus, patience and commitment to dialogue are necessary.

Although dialogue as a political response to threats to democracy, peace and stability creates dilemmas and challenges for decision-makers, there is

a definite need for interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation among the world's communities if we are to transform conflict, build peace and ensure respect for basic human rights. It is important that the United Nations, as the representative of the international community, continue to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue as an important political mechanism for enhancing mutual understanding and respect for freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Jorge Skinner-Klée, Chairman of the delegation of Guatemala.

Mr. Skinner-Klée (Guatemala) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would like to congratulate those who promoted the initiative to convene this High-level Dialogue, because the topics that we are discussing are undeniably timely. No one should forget the valuable contribution of religions to civilizations and to the very identity of the individuals making up those civilizations. This leads us to recognize the need to accept the obvious cultural diversity that characterizes the world of today, which is an inexhaustible source of collective and fertile enrichment for contemporary societies.

Promoting tolerance and dialogue within each civilization is essential to generating respect, peaceful coexistence and cooperation among individuals and among peoples, thus protecting the diversity of beliefs, cultures and languages. All Members of the United Nations and of the human family accept the challenge of fighting for peace and friendly relations between States, which in turn calls for promoting respect for fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of belief, the essential condition of which is tolerance. At the same time, tolerance is the premise of respect for the rights of others; without respect, there is no possibility of harmony or concord.

I am from a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual country. Within that multicultural context, we enjoy a freedom of worship that makes our social fabric multifaceted. We have Christians, Jews and Muslims living together, alongside a very extensive and varied indigenous community whose Mayan cosmological vision has been excluded, debased and oppressed for five centuries. It is being reassessed, however, in the context of contemporary society, allowing us to alleviate social tensions and inequities, improve mutual understanding and prevent racism and discrimination.

In the context of the peace agreements that ended a 40-year fratricidal war, we have concluded one such agreement on the identity and rights of indigenous peoples. The agreements were achieved through years of dialogue and mutual understanding. In that respect, we also wish to acknowledge the virtue and fortitude of women over the centuries, which have allowed cultures to survive and have protected and transmitted the goods and values of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, while ensuring the education of successive generations.

Guatemala does not see tolerance as a means of institutionalizing inequalities and hierarchies, or of holding people back and perpetuating their exclusion and discrimination, thereby trampling the intrinsic dignity of the individual. We encourage tolerance that promotes genuine dialogue, opens our minds to the knowledge of others, and familiarizes us with the values, customs and religion of each culture. Such a dialogue is an active learning experience and leads to mutual understanding. Such dialogue is possible between individuals and nations if it is based on equality, and between cultures and religions if based on honesty, equity and, most importantly, respect.

We firmly believe that ignorance leads to the worst forms of intolerance. In a globalized and cosmopolitan world, migration, for instance — be it motivated by economic reasons or conflicts — has clearly shown the need for us to learn about one another and to promote tolerance, universal values and mutual understanding in order to achieve peaceful and fruitful coexistence, with the equal participation of men and women.

We therefore pay tribute to this Organization, which has provided the entire human family with instruments that allow us to promote the universal values set down in the provisions of the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. The latter even goes so far as to assert that intercultural dialogue is "the best guarantee of peace" and an "imperative indissociable from respect for the dignity of the individual".

Guatemala has actively participated in the UNESCO Culture of Peace programme and supports all initiatives, such as that promoted by Turkey and Spain,

related to the Alliance of Civilizations, as well as the activities of the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace. In raising cultural diversity to the level of shared heritage of humankind, modern multicultural societies have taken a major step towards recognizing that this heritage is a living and renewable treasure and thus a process that guarantees the survival of our species.

It is impossible in so few minutes to discuss formulas that will resolve the long-standing problems arising from exclusion, prejudice, racism, xenophobia, fanaticism and intolerance. We are encouraged, however, by the fact that the international community has at its disposal authoritative instruments that establish basic standards for human coexistence.

Now is the time for action to reduce ignorance about our neighbours and to attenuate social tensions with a view to strengthening international cohesion and solidarity. We need to end the clandestine trade behind armed conflict and war, and truly combat poverty, hunger, malnutrition and ignorance; racism and intolerance towards immigrants and ethnic, cultural and religious minorities; and prejudice and stereotypes based on religion or culture. Those are the real triggers of conflict. We must also recognize that violence is never the appropriate response to such problems.

Mahatma Gandhi said:

> "I reject violence, because the good that it appears to produce does not last long; in contrast, the badness that it produces is long-lasting."

A few days ago before this Assembly, we celebrated the anniversary of the birth of the universal humanist Mahatma Gandhi, whose legacy of non-violence is as relevant today as it has ever been. It is therefore fitting that we should celebrate the International Day of Non-Violence. We are fully convinced that 365 days a year should be devoted to eliminating violence from our lives and from our thinking, since if we are unable to form societies that engage in dialogue, grow in respect for cultural diversity, cooperate to achieve development, and learn to live in peace, we will lose ground to conflict, war and injustice.

Mr. Sahel (Morocco) (*spoke in Arabic*): I am pleased at the outset to congratulate Mr. Kerim on his election to the presidency of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session, and we are hopeful that his work will be crowned with success.

I wish also to extend my warmest thanks to Sheikha Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa, who organized several meetings on the topic of interreligious and intercultural cooperation and understanding.

Today's High-level Dialogue is being held in circumstances marked by ongoing ethnic and doctrinal intolerance and violence; hence the importance of such initiatives as our meeting today to discuss the optimal avenues of cooperation to achieve greater understanding and rapprochement among religions and cultures and to uproot all forms of hatred and extremism.

On this occasion, we highly appreciate the strenuous efforts of the United Nations to consolidate the foundations of such dialogue. We also express our appreciation for the final report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations, which includes important recommendations to activate and concretize the dialogue among cultures and religions.

We wish also to express our gratitude for the appointment of Mr. Jorge Sampaio as High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations and head of the Group of Friends of the Alliance so that he can endow that initiative with mechanisms to activate the recommendations of the High-level Group. As a member of the Group, the Kingdom of Morocco will spare no effort to contribute to the success of its mission. The Kingdom of Morocco places the issue of dialogue among cultures and religions at the level of strategic options. We believe that there is a pressing need to strengthen openness, which will ensure religious and cultural coexistence and stability and peace among States.

Based on this firm conviction and the instructions of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, Morocco has launched a number of bold and responsible initiatives. We recall here, for example, the first World Conference of Imams and Rabbis, held in Brussels in 2005. The second such conference was held in Seville in 2006 under the honorary chairmanship of His Majesty King Mohammed VI and King Juan Carlos of Spain. It focused on the important role of dialogue among religions as an effective means to combat violence and marginalization, and on the main role of men of religion in establishing rapprochement among people.

In addition to supporting such initiatives and attempting to foster serious dialogue among religions

and cultures, Morocco suggested, at the most recent Arab summit in Khartoum, the drafting of an international charter that would specify rules requiring respect when referring to the holy sites and spiritual beliefs of all peoples.

Through his religious lessons throughout Ramadan, His Majesty King Mohammed VI dealt with topics directly related to the spreading of tolerance and mutual respect within Islam and between Islam and other religions. Morocco is of the view that the dialogue among religions and cultures is a main pillar in the relations among States and should go beyond circumstantial requisites and should be part of a continuous process firmly based on respect for human rights, particularly the rights of freedom, dignity and life without discrimination among races, religions, cultures and nations.

Achieving this requires conscious and continuous efforts that will enable us to go beyond self-interest and to enrich our common knowledge and experiences. Knowledge of the other and understanding the cultures of others are the only means to overcome hatred and malice and will enable us to achieve lasting peace, as well as enabling each member of the international community to live in peace, tranquility and dignity.

We believe that diversity of religious and cultural activities and meetings on the international level contribute considerably to national and international awareness of the importance of dialogue among religions and its central role in achieving peace. We are of the view that promoting understanding among religions and cultures in educational curricula will lead to correcting the negative images of the other and replacing it with a culture of tolerance and openness. Dialogue among religions and cultures is related to the need to defend such crucial issues as our aspiration to achieve freedom, dignity and development. Affirming our spiritual and cultural diversity within the framework of dialogue does not cancel out cooperation and commitment, but will help us achieve our desired goals.

Morocco, in conclusion, emphasizes the need to coordinate all initiatives related to dialogue among religions that are embraced by the United Nations so as to speed up follow-up work on the matter. Establishing a specialized unit within the Secretariat to take care of this is a practical proposal that should be supported.

The Acting President: I now call on His Excellency Mr. Alisher Vohidov, chairman of the delegation of Uzbekistan.

Mr. Vohidov (Uzbekistan) (*spoke in Russian*): Let me, at the outset, express gratitude to the organizers and initiators of this event. There is no doubt that we particularly need to note the great contribution that the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines have made and thank them for the efforts they have undertaken.

Today's realities clearly demonstrate the growing relevance of the further reinvigoration of international efforts to strengthen intercultural and interreligious dialogue, which, today, can be seen as one of the key issues on the international agenda. Promoting such a dialogue is increasingly relevant to augmenting stability and development in today's world.

Given this, the role of the United Nations, more than ever, is important in encouraging tolerance, mutual understanding and cultural diversity. We commend the importance of the High-level Dialogue currently underway in promoting intercultural and interreligious understanding and cooperation for the betterment of the world.

Uzbekistan is a multi-ethnic State, where, side by side, 136 ethnic groups and minorities live together. Such ethnic and cultural diversity is something we see as a national heritage, as a source of fruitful interaction and enrichment of those people of varying cultures and ethnic groups who live in our country. All this stems from the many years in which cultures and religions have interacted in Uzbekistan.

The territory of Uzbekistan, today and for many centuries, has served as a bridge linking East and West. Thanks to its proximity near the great Silk Road, our ancient land became known as an important crossroads on this road where varying civilizations and cultures interacted with each other, and this interaction, accordingly, became famous as an invaluable contribution to the development of all humankind.

In our ancient land, together with the holy sites of Islam, we carefully preserve unique and distinct monuments of Buddhist culture in the Surkhandarya valley, Jewish historical monuments in Samarkand and Bukhara, very early monuments of Zoroastrian culture in Khorezm and pilgrimage sites for Muslims, Christians and Jews in Samarkand and Bukhara.

The traditions of tolerance, goodness and respect for other cultures and religions has formed the basis of the national policy established in the years that have followed independence. These principles have been enshrined in the Constitution of the country, which emphasizes that all of its citizens have equal rights and freedoms and are equal before the law, without distinction on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, language, religion, social origins or social status.

Since the first days of Uzbekistan's independence, the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, has defined the issue of strengthening interreligious and intercultural accord as one of the priorities of State policy. Because of this approach, today's Uzbek society is a worthy example of cultural pluralism and tolerance.

On the initiative on the head of our State, the year 1992 saw the establishment of the Republican Inter-ethnic Cultural Centre, which provides valuable assistance of all kinds to the activities of more than 140 cultural centres representing the various ethnic groups living in Uzbekistan today. The Centre does its utmost to contribute to their work of maintaining and developing the unique traditions, customs and languages inherent in each ethnic group. Representatives of varying ethnic groups living in the country are contributing to the strengthening of the independence of our State and constructing a democratic society. They are given every opportunity to develop their native language, culture, theatre and fine arts, folk art, customs and traditions.

As delegates know, the intercultural dialogue has not only an ethnic but also a religious dimension. In this regard, strengthening interreligious harmony has a key role to play in our common efforts to ensure harmony among the varying cultures in developing the culture of the world. In this context, I would note that since the beginning of independence in Uzbekistan, religion has been seen as a factor for forming people's spiritual outlook on the basis of the principles of morality and preserving the rich spiritual and moral legacy of our people. Especially now, when humankind is going through a complex process of development, religion has particular relevance in moral and spiritual terms, bringing together diverse peoples in their joint efforts against evil and violence.

At present, Uzbekistan has representatives of 16 religious faiths. There are more than 2,000 religious organizations operating, including Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and others. To interact with religious organizations and to provide them assistance in carrying out their activities, and to jointly work out measures to promote interreligious and inter-ethnic peace and harmony, the Government of Uzbekistan has established a council on affairs of faith under the Committee for Religious Affairs in Uzbekistan. This Council includes leaders of the Board of Muslims in Uzbekistan, Tashkent and Central Asia, the Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists, the Centre of Churches of Christians of the Full Gospel, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the religious Jewish Society of Tashkent.

In the years since Uzbekistan's independence, the first translations of the Koran into Uzbek were published, as was the Hadith Collection of Al-Bukhari, the Bible, the 16 books of the Old Testament and the entire New Testament, the history of the apostles and other religious literature. In late 2004, the Muslim leadership of Uzbekistan, along with the Republican Society for the Blind, published the Holy Koran in braille. I emphasize that Uzbekistan became the third State in the world to carry out this noble undertaking.

I take this opportunity to note that, to the great credit of Uzbekistan with respect to Islamic culture and science and in terms of protecting monuments and further enriching the legacy of Islam, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization declared Tashkent a world capital of Islamic culture for 2007. The holding this year in Tashkent of international conferences called "Islam and Tolerance: the example of Uzbekistan", "Uzbekistan's contribution to the development of Islamic civilization", is yet another salient example of the constant and extensive attention Uzbekistan devotes to the promotion of intercultural and interreligious cooperation.

It is no secret that today in different corners of the world there are, unfortunately, trends towards a growth of intercultural and interreligious intolerance. Such trends could disrupt the process of promoting understanding between peoples and representatives of different faiths and could set serious precedents in terms of escalation of interreligious confrontation and extremist undertakings. In this regard, the consolidation of international efforts is increasingly relevant, as is a joint and coordinated response to

pressing challenges in the area of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Effective new steps are needed to preserve an atmosphere of tolerance in relations between peoples, religions and cultures, based on equality and mutual respect.

For its part, the Republic of Uzbekistan firmly condemns any manifestations of religious or ethnic intolerance, terrorism or extremism, as well as attempts to use religion to justify them. We are undertaking every effort, nationally, regionally and globally, to promote interreligious and intercultural mutual understanding and cooperation for the cause of peace.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Liu Zhenmin, chairman of the delegation of China.

Mr. Liu Zhenmin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China supports the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, initiated by the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines, during the current session of the General Assembly.

Religious and cultural diversity is a valuable asset of society and an important engine for human creativity and progress. The ever-deepening globalization process has further narrowed the distance among different religions and cultures. In the current world, various religions and cultures present us with great opportunities to learn from each other, but they are also experiencing unprecedented conflict among themselves. The evolution of human history has shown that difference is the motivation and starting point for dialogue; equality is the prerequisite and basis for exchanges; and candid and pragmatic dialogue and exchange can help drive our efforts to maintain peace and promote development.

The Chinese Government has always upheld the concept of harmony in diversity. We encourage dialogue on the basis of equality and are opposed to extremism and the imposition of one's own beliefs and values on others, as well as discrimination, prejudice and xenophobia based on religious, ethnic or other grounds. In the current international situation, this dialogue on the theme of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation is very relevant and important. Promoting dialogue and cooperation among religions and cultures is conducive to enhancing mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among peoples of the world and is beneficial to the global diversity and the common progress of humankind.

The evolution and development of Chinese civilization over the past 5,000 years have proven that religion and culture can play a positive role in harmonious development. The openness and inclusiveness of the Chinese culture have enabled various religions and cultures to flourish in China. From indigenous Taoism to imported Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Catholicism, all major religions of the world are able to coexist peacefully and to grow steadily in China. While developing themselves, the five religions have also enriched the Chinese culture. "Harmony is most precious; love should be universal" — these are the traditional concepts of Chinese culture. China believes that if various religions and cultures avoid self-righteousness, subjectivity and prejudice and instead practice mutual tolerance and understanding, it is then possible to avoid confrontation and conflict of a religious nature.

The Chinese Government respects freedom of religion and pursues a policy of independence in running religious affairs. According to incomplete statistics, there are currently more than 100 million religious believers in China, about 85,000 religious sites, 300,000 clergy, more than 3,000 religious groups and 74 religious schools to train clergy.

China actively supports the participation of its religious community in international cooperation and exchanges, as a way to increase mutual understanding and promote common development. Last June, the Chinese Government hosted in Nanjing the third Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue. The Nanjing Statement on Interfaith Dialogue, adopted on that occasion, made proposals for the promotion of interfaith dialogue. The Statement has been distributed as an official document at the current session of the General Assembly.

In order to work towards the peaceful coexistence of different religions and cultures, the international community should base its action on the following three approaches.

First, we must adopt the approach of "harmony in diversity" in addressing international affairs. "Harmony in diversity" means being harmonious but not homogeneous, different but not confrontational. This approach will help us not only to maintain friendly relations with our neighbours and resolve

conflicts, but also to facilitate religious and cultural dialogue as part of our common effort to maintain peace and security.

Secondly, we must strengthen education and public awareness. Respect for different religions and cultures should be incorporated into text books. There should be cultural exchanges and cooperation in the field of education, and efforts should be made to advocate religious and cultural equality, tolerance, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

Thirdly, we must enlist the aid of the media. The media bear a special responsibility in promoting tolerance, peace, fairness and harmony. We should encourage the media to play a positive role by disseminating peace values common to all cultures and religions and promoting harmony, understanding and mutual respect.

Actions speak louder than words. Engaging in interreligious and intercultural dialogue and cooperation has become a necessity universally recognized by the international community. We have seen the emergence of various initiatives and mechanisms within the framework of the United Nations. We hope that these initiatives and mechanisms can complement each other and form a synergy so as to make use of the platform offered by the United Nations, where all ethnic groups, cultures and religions are represented, to construct a bridge of communication and cooperation with a view to promoting the common development of human society and building a harmonious world.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Kirsti Lintonen, chairperson of the delegation of Finland.

Ms. Lintonen (Finland): Finland fully associates itself with the statement made earlier by the representative of Portugal on behalf of the European Union.

As noted earlier by other speakers in this very interesting discussion, there have been many calls and cries for dialogue over perceived civilizational, cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries in recent years. Religion has again become both an important source of identity and a political force. This development has been noted globally, as globalization has resulted in national borders losing some of their earlier relevance in matters of culture and religion.

Since religious identity is increasingly forming the basis for political action, it is clear that religious discourse and religious activities are fast becoming important arenas for negotiating all types of social issues. Consequently, debates over religion, including public conflicts over religious themes, often reflect a reality outside the realm of religion. For example, many of the recent controversies relating to religious issues involving people of immigrant origin cannot be understood unless the social situation of these populations is taken into account.

Dialogue focused on religion is always useful, but it does not cure the illnesses of social reality, such as unemployment, feelings of unworthiness and marginalization. Social problems can be changed not through discussion but through deeds. Exclusion and repression never lead to sustainable solutions, reflected in tolerance, diversity and mutual respect. On the contrary, exclusion and repression push those who are denied a voice to uncompromisingly assert a distinct identity or to resort to violence.

Against this background, it is easier to see that some of the challenges we face in building multicultural and multireligious societies are not due to differences among religions as such. Instead, they are reflections of social problems that give rise to small groups that seek to build an ideological foundation and gain support for their political cause. We must not allow these extreme views to overshadow those of the majority and the mainstream.

The role of religious communities in defusing conflicts cannot be overemphasized. The faithful need to discuss respect for religious beliefs and freedom of expression within their own communities in addition to pursuing dialogue with other religious communities in order to develop a common understanding of religious tolerance. The situation demands self-reflection and adaptation to changed circumstances from everyone: citizens, Governments and other actors, including religious organizations and the media.

We need to cross the threshold of suspicion and distrust through mutual respect of the other and free ourselves from prejudices in order to recognize the common values of holiness, humanity and peace present in all cultural and religious traditions.

We need to counter the misuse of religious identity and feelings for divisive ethnic and political purposes. Encounters free of political overtones and

agendas between authentic representatives of religious communities have revealed the potential for spiritual discourse in overcoming bitter historical and political memories and prejudices.

All of us are encouraged by the multitude of local, regional and international initiatives and processes that promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue and understanding. However, this positive development makes coordination imperative.

Since 2006, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative has put intercultural and interreligious dialogue firmly in a multilateral context and on the agenda of the United Nations. The Alliance has the great advantage of bringing together many threads emanating from other initiatives and processes in this field. We would like to stress the need for concrete measures and the implementation of the Action Plan. All of us need to step up our efforts in the areas of education, youth, gender, migration and media.

For Finland, the Alliance of Civilizations is a key forum for the development and implementation of measures to prevent divisions from arising among different populations, religions, cultures and civilizations — a task that seems to be becoming more and more important in the entire world, Europe included.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Mohammed Al-Allaf, chairman of the delegation of Jordan.

Mr. Al-Allaf (Jordan) (*spoke in Arabic*): Jordan welcomes the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. We thank both Pakistan and the Philippines for this initiative, which constitutes a promising beginning and foundation for intellectual contacts between cultures and religions.

The international community has reached a crucial turning point: either we must resign ourselves to the situation of tension in the world and accept the consequences of conflict and dispute, or we must appeal to reason and good sense by laying the foundations of a positive and constructive dialogue that enhances the common denominators of various cultures and religions, placing them at the service of humankind.

In recent years, we have seen a reduction in the power of the left in many parts of the world; that has gone hand in hand with a proliferation of political trends that consider Islam to be an adversary. Islam is in no way an adversary. The political trends in the media and cultures that mobilize to promote that view are simply desperate and unrealistic, and in no way reflect the tolerance that is advocated by monotheistic religions and world civilizations. We have the right to question the agendas of such schools of thought and their real hidden objectives.

Currently, over 20 prestigious academic institutions are organizing events that, although held at a great distance from one another, share the topic of Islamic fascism. That is not just a spontaneous, innocent, non-political and non-ideological approach; it is an organized, systematic and deliberate approach seeking to establish an imaginary link between Islam and violence. We would therefore wish to see today's High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace become a historic option for people not just to enhance communication and understanding, but also to avoid the trap of tension, conflict and war.

The tensions, conflicts, closed-mindedness, discrimination and prejudice prevailing in today's world lead us to believe that the dialogue that we wish to achieve at this stage must be based on the principles of mutual respect, equality and the rejection of terrorism, extremism, racism and fanaticism of all kinds. The dialogue we seek is one that would reconcile and balance deep-rooted traditions and modernity. Jordan wishes to send the message that dialogue and coexistence are the only options that will overcome the current tensions arising from the diversity of cultures and religions so that we can all live in harmony in a climate of peace, security and stability.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan believes in the importance of reason and, through its Government, has developed a message, known as the Amman Message, of dialogue and communication at the national, regional and international levels. The Message reveals the true face of Islam, a vector of noble human values and principles; it seeks to absolve Islam of ignorant and biased thinking that links it to terrorism and violence and accuses it of fanaticism and prejudice. The message is all the more important in providing for a series of practical agreed measures between clerics from Muslim countries and the spiritual leaders of the various Muslim sects with

respect to combating extremist thought and *takfiri* thinking, whereby some Muslims charge others with unbelief; eliminating violence; and promoting tolerance and acceptance of others by clearly identifying those who are authorized to issue Islamic *fatwa*. That will help to reduce political, religious and intellectual tensions and to mobilize local and international public opinion on the tolerance that is a feature of Islam, contributing to the understanding of Islam as a partner and not as an adversary.

Moreover, the Governments of Jordan and Spain have reached an agreement on the Amman statement of 24 April 2006. In the context of the statement, a working group comprised of prominent representatives of civil society has been established to identify practical means to promote respect and understanding between the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds. In the Euro-Mediterranean context, an institute for dialogue among cultures has been established to demonstrate that dialogue between partners has unlimited possibilities.

Jordan believes that the United Nations is still the ideal forum for discussing these issues. The United Nations brings us together, despite our differences. Jordan therefore welcomes the Alliance of Civilizations initiative and the upcoming convening of its first annual meeting in Madrid on 15 and 16 January 2008. The meeting will be a great opportunity to exchange opinions and views among civil societies, academic circles and the private sector, and will enable the adoption of practical measures to promote dialogue among the members of the Alliance.

In conclusion, modern civilizations have found themselves in a deplorable isolation from the world and from one another. The world, meanwhile, has achieved its greatest successes through cooperation exchange and communication on all fronts — technological, scientific, and arts and literature. Let us therefore work together to check this destructive acceleration of conflict and build instead an edifice of hope and confidence in the future.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Henry MacDonald, chairman of the delegation of Suriname.

Mr. Macdonald (Suriname): I commend the initiative of organizing this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace in order to advance the values of mutual understanding and tolerance.

In that regard, I am privileged to present Suriname as a model of successful interreligious and intercultural collaboration. Let me start by informing the General Assembly that Surinamese society is multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilinguistic and multireligious. The make-up of Suriname's population comprises approximately 10 main ethnic groups and at least as many mixed types originating from its colonial past. We have an ethnic composition that is very diverse, consisting of descendants from all corners of the world, including the native Amerindians; Europeans; African maroons and creoles; Asians from India, Java and China; people from the Middle-East, including Lebanese, Syrians and Jews; and other groups. In addition to the aforementioned, we practice different types of religion: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Baha'i and shamanism.

As a result, different languages are spoken in Surinamese society, which also contributes to our rich and colourful culture, expressed through many different folkloric and cultural traditions, such as rituals and ceremonies, arts and crafts, music and performance, cultural dances and, most importantly, a diversified cuisine. It is this colourful diversity of cultures and cultural expressions and the harmonious relationships between groups which makes a profound impression on foreigners visiting the country.

The acceptance of and appreciation for each individual group for the different cultural expressions of the others is extraordinary. What is noticeable is that all these ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds and traditions coexist and cooperate peacefully with each other. This is reflected in the political representation in the Administration. Growing up in such a society teaches one to respect values and traditions from different groups existing and living together in harmony and peace.

All of that does not mean that everything is perfect. We have our differences. However, the constitution of Suriname guarantees that "no one shall be discriminated against on the grounds of birth, sex, race, language, religious origin, education, political beliefs, economic position or any other status", and that "everyone has the right of freedom of religion and philosophy of life".

The Government respects those rights in practice and seeks to protect them at all levels, and it does not tolerate any form of their abuse, either by Governmental or by private actors. The Government, consequently, does not establish requirements for recognition of religious faiths. On the contrary, Governmental policy and practice contribute to the free practice of religion. The amicable common relationship among religious groups in our society contributes to religious freedom. Most citizens, particularly those living in Paramaribo, our capital district, celebrate, to varying degrees, the religious holidays of other groups.

Since 1989, the Inter-Religious Council in Suriname has been the venue for consultation and dialogue among the main religions in the country. The Council is composed of the principal representatives of those religions. Council members meet at least twice each month to discuss planned ecumenical activities and their position on Governmental policies when necessary. It is noteworthy that, in the past, this institution has been instrumental in bringing about solutions to major national political impasses.

On the regional level, the Inter-Religious Council in Suriname cooperates with its Caribbean counterparts with the aim of discussing regional and global issues. In situations of cultural and religious pluralism, it is increasingly apparent that mutual understanding and respect for differences play a vital role in maintaining the unity necessary for genuine progress and for ensuring that the spectre of interreligious or inter-ethnic conflict does not haunt us.

At the international level, peaceful coexistence of different values and cultures remains a challenge. We therefore continue to support and promote dialogue among civilizations and remain convinced that a culture of peace and understanding can be significantly enhanced through this kind of dialogue in order to promote mutual understanding, respect and tolerance among religions, cultures and peoples all over the world. Let us be mindful of the fact that dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions is an effective remedy to prevent conflicts on national, regional and international levels. We are therefore looking forward to further enhancing the aims of interfaith dialogue when Cambodia hosts the next such dialogue in 2008.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Takahiro Shinyo, chairman of the delegation of Japan.

Mr. Shinyo (Japan): Last year, in its resolution 61/221, the General Assembly said it was alarmed that serious instances of intolerance and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, including acts of violence, intimidation and coercion motivated by religious intolerance, were on the increase in many parts of the world and threatened the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Assembly went on to emphasize the need for strengthening respect for diversity of culture and religion or belief, dialogue and understanding as the way to end discrimination and violence based on religious and other differences.

One year earlier, in 2005, the Declaration issued at the conclusion of the Bali Interfaith Dialogue, held within the framework of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), expressed similar concern, and we therefore need to keep this statement in mind as well, especially the resolve of its signatories in the areas of education, culture, media, religion and society.

I believe this High-level Dialogue provides us with an important opportunity to advance the goals of the Bali Declaration and General Assembly resolution 61/221, and I am pleased to be able to participate in it.

It is the view of Japan that interreligious and intercultural dialogue contributes to mutual understanding, and that it not only resolves existing conflicts but also helps to prevent new conflicts from arising. To enhance mutual understanding, education is clearly of critical importance. We simply must convey to our people at all levels, including the national and regional levels, that there are many religions and cultures in the world other than our own and that tolerance for them is essential if we are to secure for people everywhere the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Also important for the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue are the activities of the private sector, including non-governmental organizations, and those of local authorities. All Member States should likewise heed the messages delivered by representatives of religious groups at the Informal Meeting of Leaders on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and at this High-level

Dialogue. Greater understanding is necessary at both the community and national levels.

I would like also to briefly describe the steps Japan is taking in this area. Japan has made a positive commitment to the dialogue among civilizations that UNESCO is leading. In 2001, at the United Nations University in Tokyo, we hosted the international seminar on education and the protection of cultural heritage in South-Eastern Europe. This was a discussion about how education can help make people understand other nationalities and cultures. Participants, in addition to South-Eastern European countries themselves, included UNESCO, UNICEF and the Council of Europe.

In 2005, Japan hosted the World Civilization Forum 2005 in Tokyo. Japan was one of the co-chairs of the counter-terrorism meeting of the Regional Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), held in Singapore in May 2007, and contributed to the first discussion there on intercivilization dialogue. Last July, Japan became a member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations. Last May, the fifth ASEM Conference on Counter-Terrorism was held in Japan; participants emphasized the need to engage in intercultural, interreligious and intercivilizational dialogue on the fight against terrorism.

To date, in addition to the World Civilization Forum I mentioned earlier, we have hosted the Seminar for Intercivilizational Dialogue with the Islamic World five times, dispatched an exchange and dialogue mission to the Middle East three times, and invited people involved in Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia to visit and speak with people in Japan. Thus, we have made continuing and varied efforts to promote intercultural and intercivilizational dialogue.

Before concluding, I would like to say just a few words about human security, which is what a society achieves when its people are free from fear and scarcity and are able to live their lives with dignity. That is to say, it is the idea and goal of the protection and empowerment of each person.

Japan believes that the idea of human security has much in common with the purpose of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, which is the satisfaction of human rights and fundamental freedoms. We are therefore convinced that such dialogue can and should be advanced through the pursuit of human security.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Claudia Blum, chairperson of the delegation of Colombia.

Ms. Blum (Colombia) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation welcomes the decision of the Assembly to convene the first formal High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. In particular, we commend the Philippines and Pakistan for their leadership in that initiative.

Colombia, as a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural nation, assigns great significance to culture, diversity, intercultural peaceful understanding and intercultural dialogue in the advancement of societies.

Cultural diversity is an asset and a fundamental value of humankind that must encourage the formulation of effective solutions to address national, regional and global challenges. In the context of globalization, which has had important benefits and simultaneously poses significant challenges, intercultural dialogue between civilizations is of increasing relevance. It is a significant objective at a time when stereotypes and inappropriate arguments are proliferating, inciting confrontation between civilizations with respect to issues relative to welfare, armed conflict, terrorism, human rights and migration, among others. Intercultural dialogue is necessary to promote attitudes that counter such stereotypes and to contribute to the creation of conditions conducive to peaceful coexistence.

My delegation would like to submit some considerations on recommendable actions related to the subject before us today.

At the national level, States must promote and protect their own cultural identity and diversity, while encouraging social respect for cultural diversity at the international level. In that respect, legislative and political actions are recommended in order to guarantee and promote respect for cultural rights, to promote and preserve the local and world heritage, and to support artistic expression.

Furthermore, greater importance must be attached to legal and political measures taken to protect and promote the rights of national ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups and minorities. It is also important to guarantee the rights of migrants, who are

subject in diverse contexts to xenophobia and other discriminatory practices based on culture, religion, language or nationality.

Dialogue must be promoted not only among governmental or political actors. The promotion of messages of understanding of and esteem for cultural diversity is also the responsibility of social, economic, academic and artistic leaders, representing influential sectors within societies. Changing attitudes begins at the community and even at the family levels.

Religion is an integral dimension of cultural diversity. UNESCO has recognized that. The Colombian Constitution recognizes the right to freedom of religion and the freedom of all, either individually or in community, to practice their religion or beliefs. Furthermore, our Constitution establishes equality of faiths under the law. Colombia considers that interreligious dialogue and the full guarantee of rights related to religion are also essential to counteract irrational expressions that use religion as a way of justifying confrontation.

The mass media can also contribute to promoting understanding and peaceful coexistence. It is appropriate for media from all regions of the world to establish, on a voluntary and autonomous basis, permanent spaces to analyse and deepen their function in the peaceful interaction of civilizations, taking every political, social and economic context into account. In any case, to that end freedom of information and expression cannot be restricted in any form that transgresses international human rights instruments. Freedom of information and expression is an essential foundation of democratic systems and coexistence.

Child and youth education is another essential aspect. It is critical to create the capacity for analysis in children and youth, and to promote their understanding of the value of cultural pluralism and respect for differences. Promoting such values is no threat to the consolidation of national culture. On the contrary, awareness of the intrinsic richness of diversity implies greater recognition of and regard for one's own cultural identity, while avoiding belligerent attitudes.

At the multilateral level, my delegation feels that a cooperative approach among nations must exist. Such an approach should be based on respect for a nation's identity and for existing international obligations, and ascribe value to the cultural diversity and particularities of human groups as a collective asset. It must promote dialogue over the confrontation, politicization or irrational obstacles to cultural diversity that persist in certain spheres.

Given the reality of a world exposed to irresponsible expressions of cultural conflict, the United Nations can deepen the analysis, formulation and implementation of actions that enable such destructive trends to be prevented and reversed. In that respect, Colombia recognizes the role of such initiatives as the Alliance of Civilizations and such organizations as UNESCO. It is important for actions to be coordinated and to have clear focal points in order to avoid the dispersal of effort.

With such an approach, the United Nations can contribute to counteracting extreme positions that seek to justify violence and disrespect among individuals and peoples. Both in dialogue among States and in the work of entities of the United Nations system, a respectful, open and constructive view of the historical differences and cultural diversity of human societies is fundamental for the achievement of consensus, in the certainty that such diversity is not an obstacle to the full accomplishment of this Organization's principles and purposes and of the universal values of international peaceful coexistence, and with the vision that such diversity is one of the factors that drives the development of nations.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Sirodjidin Aslov, chairman of the delegation of Tajikistan.

Mr. Aslov (Tajikistan) (*spoke in Russian*): On behalf of my delegation, I would like to extend to the President of the General Assembly my sincere appreciation for organizing today's Dialogue. The theme of this Dialogue is an urgent issue for my country and for the entire region.

Some nine years ago, when the Assembly decided to proclaim the United Nations Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, we held the view that cultural and religious diversity was not a threat but an asset and a major driving force for humankind's progress. Such diversity is the source and inspiration for dialogue based on mutual tolerance and respect. Since that time, numerous events have been held with the aim of fostering mutual understanding, trust, tolerance and respect.

Regrettably, however, we have to note that what we witness in today's world is a lack of tolerance and ever-increasing alienation. We are certain that once we fully realize that cultural and religious diversity is a source of strength, rather than a cause for disagreement, our dialogue will become stable and long-term. We believe that such a dialogue will take place only once we recognize that we are living in a world of diversity, but that we share common values.

In Tajikistan, a culture of tolerance and respect has been shaped over several thousand years marked by interaction among diverse cultures and religions. Today, these values are codified in the principal law of our country, the constitution. Article 26 of the constitution, in particular, states that each citizen has the right to determine his or her religious preference and participate in religious ceremonies. In Tajikistan today, representatives of many confessions such as Christianity — including Orthodoxy and Lutheranism — Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, the Baha'i faith, Krishnaism and others freely observe their religious traditions and participate in religious ceremonies.

Last year, Tajikistan, together with other States, sponsored General Assembly resolution 61/221. Tajikistan is a party to the Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace initiative, whose second ministerial meeting was held in New York recently. In this connection, I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the need to enhance the activities of the Secretariat focal point appointed in accordance with that General Assembly resolution.

This is a time of unified efforts and common aspirations to address the major challenges facing humankind. Mutually advantageous international cooperation is thus becoming an imperative if we are to reduce and prevent new global threats and dangers, such as terrorism, extremism, illicit drug trafficking and transnational organized crime. Current trends towards nationalism and extremism, as well as the risk of military conflict, require us to expand and promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue at the regional and international levels.

No party to international relations should remain indifferent to such issues. For this reason, searching for new modes of cooperation and integration for regions and countries, developing the dialogue of civilizations, safeguarding peace, establishing an environment of trust and renouncing ethnic and religious confrontation among diverse cultures should become the primary focus of our dialogue.

Currently, my country is hosting a meeting of leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Community and the Organization of the Treaty on Collective Security. Those organizations, in cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, are not only considering and implementing a variety of treaties and agreements on economic, social and security issues but are also devoting special attention to cooperation in culture, science, education, health care and other areas. We believe that further development of cooperation among those organizations also promotes the formation of a unified social and cultural realm, which can sustain cultural diversity and dialogue among cultures and religions. It has already become a tradition for Tajikistan and friendly States to exchange culture days. By organizing such events, we not only strengthen friendship among our peoples but also foster intercultural and interfaith dialogue.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight that dialogue is also important for another goal that is vital to humankind: achieving development. Through the exchange of experience and the joint search for solutions, we will be able to deal with today's and tomorrow's social and economic issues of common concern. Here, it is essential to ensure continued dialogue at all levels, from local to national, regional and international, with the broad participation of women and young people.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Bashar Ja'afari, chairman of the delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I am pleased to address the General Assembly, this important international forum, to discuss a highly important matter which for years has been the object of consideration by thinkers worldwide: the culture of peace and the centrality of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace.

On 10 and 11 May 2007, at the initiative of the President of the General Assembly at its sixty-first session, the Assembly convened an informal thematic debate entitled "Civilizations and the challenge for

peace: Obstacles and opportunities". That debate is relevant to the matter under discussion here today. It culminated in our current High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, whose aim is to encourage tolerance, international understanding and respect for religions, faiths and cultural diversity. The two organizers of this High-level Dialogue — the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines — have painstakingly prepared this Dialogue by focusing it on the challenges, best practices and strategies for cooperation among religions and cultures in today's world. Perhaps these matters accurately encapsulate the issues and problems faced by the international community with regard to interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. Building bridges of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation will definitely help to support peace in the world, disseminate a culture of peace in societies and will narrow the gap of misunderstanding and ignorance among peoples. It will also lighten the burden of prejudice and subjectivity born of intellectual extremism in a world that is not free from ideological and political complexities.

In that connection, it is important for enlightened people worldwide to hasten to advance interreligious and intercultural dialogue, according priority to intellectual exchange and respect for the identity of the other, and not to mix religion and politics.

The issue of demonizing the other to spawn divisiveness, threats or conflict must be addressed during the present Dialogue, which is being held under General Assembly auspices. We must ensure the transparency and objectivity and political neutrality of the dialogue and thus the acceptability of its results. We believe that any serious dialogue designed to consolidate interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace should not be unilateral or limited to selectively fostering ties of understanding and cooperation between specific religions or cultures at the expense of inclusive interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

In that regard, we must understand that the lack of understanding among human beings is based on misunderstanding of religions and cultures, and not on structural shortcomings in these lofty ethical concepts. Human history shows that consummate and elegant models of intercultural understanding and cooperation arose during ancient times when intellectual and military clashes were rampant. Yet in recent decades, the international community has witnessed violent clashes and a lack of dialogue and understanding, while at the same time, some vaunt intellectual phenomena such as globalization and the communications and information revolution.

The twentieth century was the most violent in human history, although it also witnessed unprecedented scientific progress and advances in human communications. During the twentieth century, two world wars erupted and took the lives of millions of human beings. The same century saw the most violent colonial injustices against African, Asian and Latin American cultures that date back to the beginning of time. That century also witnessed the first use of nuclear weapons by man against man.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we are witnessing radical forms of human violence in more than one place in the world, as if there were a return in the thinking of political decision makers to a concept of human relations based on violent clashes among many sovereign States. We had hoped that such reactionary thinking had ended once and for all.

It is saddening that the international community is forced to hold a dialogue on interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace at a time of globalization and the information revolution: an age that presupposes that human beings are no longer ignorant of or indifferent to one another.

Is it conceivable that such a significant matter should not be on the agenda of hundreds of prestigious intellectual and religious institutions and universities? Is it conceivable that in the twenty-first century we should still be seeking best practices and strategies for interreligious and intercultural cooperation? Is that attributable to massive human ignorance over the centuries?

Responding to these challenges requires a comprehensive intellectual revolution against all forms of intellectual isolation and all preconceived ideas. The response rests on promoting cultural discourse, augmenting contacts and communication, bridging the gap of misunderstanding and settling international disputes justly and equitably while remaining committed to the elimination of injustice and to putting an end to foreign occupation everywhere and to using religion politically for expansionist and settlement

purposes, while ignoring the rights of others and their cultural and holy sites.

In conclusion, my country supports the proposal submitted by the Philippines and Pakistan to establish a new focal point in the United Nations. My delegation concurs with the November 2006 report of the High-level Group on the Alliance of Civilizations established by the Secretary-General, and the important political views it sets out, relating in particular to an end to the Israeli occupation of the Arab territories and a just settlement of the Palestinian question.

The Acting President: Before giving the floor to the next speaker, I would like to inform members that there are still 21 speakers remaining to be heard. I would therefore again appeal to members to make their statements as concise as possible by summarizing the statements and circulating the full texts.

I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Habib Mansour, chairman of the delegation of Tunisia.

Mr. Mansour (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, let me say how proud and pleased we are to take part in today's meeting on a theme which is of great importance to Tunisia, given that the rapid and profound changes under way worldwide have led to challenges that are difficult to ignore or disregard. The question of interreligious and intercultural dialogue clearly falls within that framework.

I would be remiss if I did not express our appreciation and gratitude to the Government of Pakistan and the Government of the Philippines for having taken this important initiative and for their efforts to organize this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

Tunisia attaches great importance to the report of the Secretary-General on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace (A/62/337) and the report of the Director-General of UNESCO on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010 (A/62/97). Here, my delegation would like to thank that organization for its constructive efforts on behalf of children. We are certain too that UNESCO will play a valuable role in the implementation of the recommendations in those reports.

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is among the core themes in the recommendations set out in the 2005 World Summit Outcome (resolution 60/1). Indeed, heads of State or Government underscored enhanced cultural relations among peoples and nations as the only way to foster understanding and harmony and to counter extremism. That approach will guarantee just and lasting peace among all peoples. Tunisia's cultural policies are in total harmony with the World Summit recommendations. In that context, Tunisia is eager to disseminate the values of peace, tolerance and dialogue among the peoples and civilizations with which our country has interacted. Based on those principles, my country attaches great importance to national policies and measures to preserve our national identity to ensure understanding among peoples, openness to and positive and effective interaction with others. That approach to society is founded on reconciling our genuine interaction with modernity on the one hand with preservation and consolidation of our national identity on the other. One Tunisian option has been to solidify the pillars of our national culture, which are firmly based on Islam and its values of tolerance.

For that reason, the President of the Republic has established a university chair in dialogue among civilizations and religions, with a view to providing an intellectual space conducive to dialogue. Furthermore, the President has instituted the International Presidential Award on Islamic Studies and has undertaken efforts to promote values such as moderation, tolerance, solidarity and openness. These initiatives give form to the contribution that Tunisia can make, thanks to its glorious history, to enriching the culture of humanism and spreading universal values and principles that are the common heritage of all peoples, despite their uniqueness.

Our university chair in dialogue was established to strengthen the foundations of peace and development, and as part of a series of other similar initiatives including the 1995 Carthage Charter on Tolerance in the Mediterranean, which calls for interreligious and intercultural dialogue for tolerance and human rights. Another Tunisian initiative was the establishment of the World Solidarity Fund to counter poverty, which the Assembly endorsed in its resolution 57/265 of 20 December 2002, thus backing our approach to the fight against poverty and marginalization as factors creating tension worldwide.

In pursuance of the General Assembly's 2001 proclamation of the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations (resolution 56/6), Tunisia has hosted a seminar on dialogue among civilizations. There, my Government reiterated its appeal to build a new world free of hatred and antagonism and called for tolerance and dialogue. Tunisia has also hosted a number of meetings and events for experts, such as the seminars organized together with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on the theme "Human civilizations and cultures: from dialogue to alliance". Tunisia has repeatedly reaffirmed that dialogue among civilizations is one of the core principles that can curb trends towards violence and terrorism and that can lay the basis for dialogue and cooperation for world peace, security and prosperity.

Based on those principles and conclusions, my delegation supports all initiatives to buttress this interreligious and intercultural dialogue. We are certain that this dialogue is the best way to protect humankind and its common values from the dangers posed by intolerance, closed-mindedness, extremism, marginalization and terrorism.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Jean-Daniel Vigny, chairman of the delegation of Switzerland.

Mr. Vigny (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): We thank the Philippines and Pakistan for having worked to convene this meeting. We would also like to thank the Secretariat and the representatives of civil society for the excellent preparation of this High-level Dialogue.

As a meeting point of diverse cultures and religions, Switzerland has had to learn peaceful coexistence within the confines of a small territory. It had to forge national unity transcending faiths, languages and economic interests. In the course of our history, religions have on occasion clashed violently. However, thanks to a shared determination to focus on what unites us on a practical level rather than on what separate us ideologically, we succeeded in ending these tensions a century and a half ago.

Switzerland has integrated this lesson of history into its policy of promoting peace. Dialogue on values does not by itself build trust; indeed, it can sometime even accentuate differences. To move forward together, therefore, it is essential to focus on solving specific problems and to find practical solutions with the parties concerned. This is why, in the context of its policy of promoting peace, Switzerland supports projects that aim to define concrete ways for communities or groups with different values and concepts to live together. However, Switzerland does not support intercultural or interreligious dialogues exclusively on abstract values or doctrinal truths.

Consequently, we fully support the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, which takes account of the political dimension of interreligious and intercultural tensions and aims to find practical solutions to such disputes. My country therefore reaffirms its full support for the High Representative Jorge Sampaio in attaining the objectives of the Alliance of Civilizations.

Ensuring respect for religious and cultural diversity is not only a simple question of political will. It is part of the far broader question of the proper functioning of the rule of law and the principles governing it: non-discrimination, freedom of expression, freedom of thought and freedom of religion or belief. It is important that we reaffirm our commitment to those rights. We are concerned about an increasing risk of stereotyping religions and beliefs and a lack of understanding for the values and practices of other religions or beliefs. We are alarmed by growing religious intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Religious intolerance is a worldwide problem and is not limited to certain religions and beliefs. Followers of all religions and beliefs, as well as non-believers, are victims of human rights violations.

Freedom of religion or belief is a multifaceted right. The many aspects of this fundamental human are guaranteed by various international legal instruments. Discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status falls within the scope of human rights legislation. In addition, it has to be stressed that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights forbids any form of incitement to religious hatred.

Switzerland is firmly convinced that it is not religion as such which has to be protected, but the non-discriminatory exercise — individually or as a member of a group — of all human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. We are convinced that we can successfully combat discrimination if we agree to approach the issue under the umbrella of religious

discrimination rather than in the context of defamation of religion.

The concept of defamation of religions is not appropriate in a human rights context, since it is individuals, both believers and non-believers alike, who have rights — and, to some extent, the communities to which they belong — not religions or beliefs as such. As the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, outlined in a recent report, the lack of an objective definition of the term "defamation of religion" makes the whole concept open to abuse. Due to the wide diversity of religions and beliefs, it is natural that genuine differences of opinion exist. Furthermore, it would be difficult and potentially dangerous to define in abstracto what constitutes defamation of religion or even to find an impartial and independent body for adjudicating such a case.

Switzerland is convinced that tolerance and mutual respect are essential to overcome differences in perceptions, concepts and ideas. Once again it is only by a constructive and respectful dialogue that we will truly overcome our divergences in opinion in order to promote mutual understanding and surmount these challenges successfully.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Ivan Romero-Martínez, chairman of the delegation of Honduras.

Mr. Romero-Martínez (Honduras) (*spoke in Spanish*): My country, Honduras, very much welcomes the opportunity to participate in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. We are of the view that this is one of the most pertinent subjects today and that it is of particular importance to humankind.

Universal respect for human thinking is as sacred as freedom itself: freedom of action, freedom of religion and political freedom. Thus, in participating in this important debate, we base our approach on the belief that one of the unifying forces of mankind is freedom. It prepares us for a permanent readiness to interact with diversity and for tolerance, ongoing and respectful dialogue, and a culture of peace among individuals with diverse outlooks and visions. It prompts us to create a culture of peace and not a culture of war. Therefore, we support all the endeavours in which this Organization and its bodies are engaged.

We support the reports and recommendations of the Secretary-General, and we support above all else the efforts that help us to combat fanaticism, intolerance and violence. We believe in dialogue and in a culture of peace. Dialogue between religions and cultures is a categorical imperative in our view. But there can be no dialogue without freedom; and there can be no freedom without a clear policy of tolerance and respect among all protagonists in a world that is increasingly global.

My country, Honduras, consistently respects all religions and cultures. Our constitution provides that all Hondurans are equal before the law, and it declares punishable any discrimination based on gender, race, class or other offence against human dignity. It also guarantees the free exercise of all religions and beliefs, without pre-eminence for any of them. All men are born free and equal in rights. Our Constitution also seeks to enforce and perpetuate a rule of law that guarantees a political society and encourages conditions in which individuals can realize their full potential as human beings in a context of justice, freedom, security, stability, pluralism, peace, representative democracy and concern for the common good.

We are pleased to note that the Secretary-General's report (A/62/337) emphasizes that in Honduras the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) established an Inter-Ecclesiastical Committee on HIV/AIDS Prevention which brings together leaders and representatives of the Catholic, Evangelical, Episcopalian and Adventist Churches as well as the Ministry of Health and the theological community. The Committee meets regularly and organizes forums and discussions on their churches' response to HIV and AIDS. Thus far, it has organized four inter-ecclesiastical forums on HIV/AIDS prevention throughout the country. The objective of forums is to encourage a common religious approach for dealing with those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. This in our view is a living example of the alliance of religions.

In this universal forum, it daily becomes more imperative for us to unite our thoughts and our hearts in acts of tolerance and mutual respect. Freedom of belief should also go hand in hand with the freedom to

exercise that belief. The establishment of a world of peace and love should go hand in hand with the genuine political will to achieve this. The desire to build an alliance of civilizations and to strengthen the dialogue between religions and cultures is within the political will of the States represented here. Let us promote this; let us act in this fashion; and let us work, day by day, to translate into reality all the words and desires that are expressed here.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Nguyen Tat Thanh, chairman of the delegation of Viet Nam.

Mr. Nguyen Tat Thanh (Viet Nam): My delegation wishes to express its appreciation to Pakistan and the Philippines for the initiative and leadership culminating in this very timely and important meeting.

I wish to thank the Secretary-General for his report.

Having been victimized by many destructive wars, the Vietnamese people treasure peace, stability and development. We therefore fully support the efforts by countries, communities and people around the world to pursue these ends through dialogue and cooperation.

In today's global village, interaction keeps increasing between religions and cultures of all parts of the world. It is an opportune time for us all to learn more about one another, not only about our commonalities or shared values, but also about our differences; to enhance unity; to accept and benefit from diversity; and to live with a culture of peace, non-violence, respect, understanding and tolerance.

In this regard, the importance of education and the media in promoting respect, understanding and tolerance must be emphasized. Concerted efforts in this respect need to be carried out at the global, regional, national and local levels.

We commend the efforts by the Alliance of Civilizations, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and the United Nations system, especially UNESCO and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), as mentioned in the report of the Secretary-General, in promoting and implementing this idea. Viet Nam welcomes the designation of a focal point in the Secretariat to coordinate mutually reinforcing activities of the United Nations system in that field.

At the regional level, Vietnamese representatives of different faiths and religions actively participate in the interfaith dialogue and exchange of experience and best practices within the framework of the Asia-Europe Meeting and in the Asia-Pacific region to further strengthen understanding and cooperation across regions.

Viet Nam is a multi-ethnic and multireligious country with 54 nationalities and many different religious communities composed of 20 millions believers living side by side in harmony, sharing the spirit of fraternity, mutual respect and assistance, while respecting and cherishing each other's unique identity. Vietnamese of different nationalities, religions and cultures joined forces in the struggle for national independence in the past and are now side by side, shouldering the task of national construction. In war or in peace, the strength of the country lies in both the unity and the diversity of its people.

Back at its first meeting in 1945, the provisional Government of Viet Nam, under the leadership of President Ho Chi Minh, issued the motto "Freedom for religious solidarity between believers and non-believers". Our 1992 Constitution reaffirms that spirit in concrete terms. Our national experience and policies in that connection guide our activities at the global level.

Before concluding, I wish to assure the General Assembly that Viet Nam will continue to make every effort, together with countries and peoples of the world, to foster understanding and cooperation in the name of peace and development for all.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Samuel Outlule, chairman of the delegation of Botswana.

Mr. Outlule (Botswana): The delegation of Botswana welcomes the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. Several statements have already been made with a great deal of eloquence and conviction. We add our voice to this important debate because peace is indivisible and the promotion of a culture of peace is both a national and a global imperative.

In contributing to this debate, we are conscious of the fact that our deliberations are an important part of the beginning of establishing the basis for mutual

understanding. It is our expectation that the statements will be followed by introspection and the readiness to make choices for tolerance. What matters in the end is not what we are able to say about the peaceful nature of our respective religions and cultures, but rather what we are prepared to do to ensure that our faiths are used as instruments for the realization of peace and good will to humankind. We must do so by empowering national institutions to promote a culture of tolerance, compromise and accommodation.

A combination of religion and culture has been the defining attribute of societies since antiquity. Whilst religion is a personal matter concerning the relationship between an individual and God, at the same time it binds us together because our lives as human beings are interconnected. Thus, faith and a way of life not only bind people together, but have over the years been instrumental in informing and shaping the development of relations between peoples and States.

This High-level Dialogue may be taking place a little too late, as it comes at a time when intolerance and hatred spurred by religious beliefs and a clash of cultures are growing at an alarming rate. And yet we cannot afford to despair or fail to act in the face of the challenges confronting us and developments we witness. At the same time, we must avoid a reactionary response by acting in a positive, purposeful and forward-looking manner. We must be fair and balanced in the search for solutions to global problems. In that way, we can avoid the politicization of religions and cultural beliefs that often leads to extremism and intolerance.

In the search for solutions to contemporary challenges associated with relations between civilizations, we do not have to reinvent the wheel. In the fifth century B.C., the Chinese philosopher Confucius once said:

> "My conduct must be guided by the golden rule of only doing and saying what I would like to have done or said to me, and never doing or saying anything that I would not like to have done or said to me."

That statement demonstrates that the desire to live in peace with one another has been the objective of people from time immemorial.

There can be no doubt that the granite foundation of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace is for all religions to encourage their followers to be kind, tolerant, merciful, just and honest with each other and other people. If religion or the followers of any faith fail to abide by those teachings, it will be difficult if not impossible to promote mutual understanding, cooperation and peace.

In an increasingly borderless world, diverse societies, individuals and communities with different cultures and religious beliefs are called upon to live together in harmony. Individuals and communities of different faiths and cultures living side by side have in them the inherent capacity to strengthen each other and to solve concrete problems confronting them here on Earth. The world will be a better place if we can all concentrate our actions on working together to improve the human condition here on Earth without necessarily abandoning our aspirations for the next order of existence.

The challenge we face is to strengthen policies that enhance the integration and participation of all citizens on the basis of equality and respect. It would be particularly helpful if religion did not assume a name. In that respect, parents and societies could bring up children without passing value judgements on other faiths or dehumanizing descriptions about followers of other faiths, thus sowing the seeds of future intolerance and a sense of superiority.

It is important to give greater attention to education and training that emphasize broad knowledge about other cultures and religions and the need for them to cohabit in peace and harmony. It is true that, historically, education and knowledge have forced religions to be more just, fair and tolerant.

Let us recognize that interreligious and intercultural dialogue is not the challenge or monopoly of the faithful alone. It is the challenge of all people and organizations of civil society who love humankind, respect life, and value harmony and the diversity of peoples on Earth. We should not forget that, through the centuries, religious people inspired by fanaticism, fundamentalism, a sense of superiority and the selfish pursuit of personal salvation have caused wars and human suffering.

In that respect, secular individuals, non-governmental organizations and States therefore have a major contribution to make in promoting international

understanding and cooperation for peace. Interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation must be rooted in universal values of respect for human rights, non-discrimination, non-violence and democracy. Those are values of collective wisdom, conscience and progress of humankind, uniting peoples of all faiths and cultures.

Africa is home to many religions and cultures. In Botswana, we are a society of many cultures, languages and religious practices, but as is the case elsewhere in Africa, we have embraced several other religious beliefs from outside the continent and today those have become an integral part of the social fabric of our societies. The Constitution of Botswana guarantees freedom of worship. Faith-based organizations are formally recognized as key players and partners with Government in many aspects of our national development effort.

We welcome the initiative of Spain and Turkey that led to the establishment of the Alliance of Civilizations. It reflects a strong belief in dialogue as the best means to remove misunderstanding, tension and conflicts, and an effective mechanism for achieving compromise, tolerance and peaceful coexistence among peoples.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that religion and culture are part of humanity and constitute very important aspects of the modern world. They cannot be wished away. Our societies have become more interconnected and interdependent because of globalization, migration and new information and communication technologies.

In this modern age, we must therefore strive to make a culture of science and technology whose priority is the search for solutions to the immediate problems of people here on Earth. That will make it possible for religions and cultures to flourish. That will in turn enable us to celebrate our diversity and use it as a platform for human progress, mutual understanding and peace.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Sanja Štiglic, chairperson of the delegation of Slovenia.

Ms. Štiglic (Slovenia): Allow me to begin by saying that Slovenia aligns itself fully with the statement delivered yesterday by the representative of Portugal on behalf of the European Union.

I am particularly honoured to address the General Assembly on this occasion. We all agree that the improvement of understanding and cooperation among people of different religions and cultures is a must if we are to forge together a world in which we can live side by side in peace. That indubitable common objective is a simple yet resounding example of the fact that we as human beings have far more things to bind us together than to keep us apart.

We all know that the globalized world of today stands at an important crossroads. Events of the past few years have aggravated relations between different parts of the world to the point where we can no longer shy away from directing all our efforts to establishing an active dialogue among the world's ethnicities, religions and cultures. We all have to join in that effort so that we can, together, build bridges between our different cultures and contribute to better understanding between our civilizations and a better future for us all.

Let me note at this point that the need for interreligious and intercultural dialogue is not in any way limited to intercontinental conversations or even to conversations among different countries. The reality of a multicultural society exists within our countries themselves. Those differences, too, must be acknowledged, but they should never divide us. Rather, they should be seen as an opportunity to find new ways to achieve mutual understanding and greater respect for each other.

Given the growing number of different initiatives on intercultural and interfaith understanding — such as the Alliance of Civilizations, the Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue, the Euromed Barcelona process, the Council of Europe white paper on intercultural dialogue, and many others — we believe that there is a need for enhanced coordination, cooperation and complementarity among them, and particularly among those within the United Nations framework.

My country wishes to contribute to the interreligious and intercultural dialogue by promoting global understanding, overcoming prejudices, and representing a pillar of humanism and cooperation in the Mediterranean. In that regard, I would like to focus on two particular elements that can, in our view, most effectively contribute to dialogue, peace and cooperation. These, in our view, are human rights and diversity education.

Ariel and Will Durant wrote that education is the transmission of civilization. We believe that the true transmission of civilization is its continuous enhancement, not by the mere emulation of established paradigms, but precisely by learning new things, by trying to understand foreign concepts, by seeking to empathize with the values of others, by promoting solidarity among peoples, and by building a comprehensive global culture of human rights and mutual understanding.

As part of the intercultural dialogue, it is important to promote mobility, especially that of young people, for what better way is there to learn about the rest of the world than to travel to it? With the hope of bringing together young people from around the world so that they may learn from each other, my country recently presented an initiative to establish a Euro-Mediterranean university, with its seat in Piran, Slovenia. It is our hope that the university will be able to contribute in some way to dialogue among youth and scholars from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds in the Mediterranean basin.

Allow me to take this opportunity also to mention another initiative that has special importance for us. In May 2006, the Slovenian Government established the Centre for European Perspective. The Centre was established with the intent of developing new thinking aimed at addressing outstanding issues in the European Union and wider Europe. One of the Centre's main objectives is also to work towards the establishment of tolerant societies by implementing projects that will create and maintain conditions for a successful dialogue among the different religious and cultural communities within Europe and beyond. We have organized numerous meetings and round tables with political and religious leaders alike from the western Balkan region.

We have also established this year a task force on intercultural dialogue. Members of the task force are international and Slovenian experts of different profiles or backgrounds, such as politicians, religious representatives, dignitaries, academics and representatives of various public institutions and organizations. My country truly believes that intercultural dialogue should be encouraged and fostered, and we want to do something about it. It must be stressed, however, that a crucial precondition for any such dialogue is freedom of expression of thought, conscience, religion and belief, and we shall continue to work in support of those important rights.

For the coming year, the Centre for European Perspective has planned two projects that are aimed at fostering dialogue between cultures in Europe. The first project will concern questions of secularism, political radicalism and immigration in the European Union; the second will try to answer the important question of how to make people of different religions and cultural backgrounds who come to Europe feel at home in the European Union.

Allow me to conclude by stating that respect for human dignity and diversity is the cornerstone of any peaceful and prosperous society. Let us build, then, upon our common values and translate them into action. My country, for one, extends its hand to anyone who wishes to join us in bringing more understanding into this world.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Juan Antonio Yáñez-Barnuevo, chairman of the delegation of Spain.

Mr. Yáñez-Barnuevo (Spain) (*spoke in Spanish*): Allow me to begin by congratulating the President of the General Assembly and the sponsors of this initiative, the Philippines and Pakistan, for organizing this High-level Dialogue. The participation of Government representatives and prominent active members of civil society provides us with a good opportunity to share ideas and opinions that will allow us to advance along the road of understanding among peoples and societies belonging to different cultures and religions for the good of peace and the progress of peoples.

Spain is aware of the importance of the challenge posed by the need for understanding among nations and peoples in today's world, and is a firm defender of dialogue and cooperation as instruments for fighting intolerance and discrimination based on cultural or religious differences.

We are convinced that the grave problems arising from the lack of mutual awareness, from intolerance in the face of difference, or from rejection of what is foreign require joint action by the international community, especially in the framework of the United Nations. This Organization has offered of late a good example of commitment in that field by adopting in the General Assembly, after many years of negotiations,

the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Spain is therefore very pleased with the progress made with initiatives such as this, in which we participate with conviction, and with others, such as the Alliance of Civilizations, which Spain is co-sponsoring with Turkey and which has already been consolidated as a United Nations initiative, as was highlighted by the Secretary-General in his statement yesterday at the beginning of this Dialogue.

We believe that the complementary nature of initiatives with similar goals is a clear and valuable sign of the importance which the international community attaches to the need to encourage tolerance, respect, dialogue and cooperation in promoting understanding and coexistence among civilizations, cultures and religions in a globalized world such as ours today. That complementary nature must find appropriate ways to avoid any unnecessary duplication and to combine valuable efforts to the same end.

In that regard, I support the statement made yesterday by the Minister of State of Portugal on behalf of the European Union with respect to the role that could be played by the Alliance of Civilizations in ensuring such coherence. The statement read out yesterday on behalf of the High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Jorge Sampaio, had a similar thrust.

The contribution of the Alliance of Civilizations to the common goal of understanding among religions and cultures, as well as to cooperation for peace, could be synthesized in the following elements. First, the Alliance of Civilizations has a mandate that is essentially pragmatic, focusing on joint action and on obtaining specific results. One of its goals is to move from the realm of ideas towards the practical, concrete and specific.

With that spirit as guide, the implementation plan for the next two years, as presented last June by Mr. Sampaio, the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, contains ideas, projects and concrete programmes that are focused on action in four specific areas: youth, education, migration and the media. Those areas are thought to be where major contributions could be made to combat the lack of dialogue and understanding among peoples and societies that belong to different cultures and religions. The goal is to encourage mutual understanding, to end preconceived notions about the other, and to promote exchange and coexistence in order to encourage respect, tolerance and dialogue, rejecting any amalgamation of religion or belief, regardless of denomination, with extremism and violence. We must do all that through education and with the cooperation of the media as we specifically address collective groups that are especially vulnerable in those matters, such as youth and migrants.

Secondly, as noted by the High Representative, it is necessary for decisions on this issue to be adopted with a global focus. At the same time, however, the development of activities at the local level is critical, since it will guarantee their true implementation and ensure that their content effectively penetrates the societies they address. The problems that arise from a lack of understanding among peoples and societies of different religions or cultures germinate and develop at the local level, even when they rise to the global level. For that reason, action must be directed mainly at the very heart of societies themselves.

In that regard, we feel that another good point of departure could be the suggestion made by High Representative Sampaio at the recent ministerial meeting of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations that international organizations — be they universal or regional — develop their own work programmes for cooperation with the Alliance of Civilizations, in particular in the four thematic areas on which the initiative focuses. He also suggested that States develop national strategies for transcultural dialogue pursuant to the principles of the Alliance of Civilizations.

At the national level, Spain is already working on defining its own national plan for the Alliance of Civilizations, a goal of which, among others, will be to address the national and international aspects of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In addition, I take this opportunity to highlight the First Annual Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations to take place in Spain on 15 and 16 January 2008. The Forum will seek to be a platform for reinforcing political support for the initiative and for obtaining concrete results in the area of youth, among others. It will be a good occasion to debate and share common progress that has been made, as well as to enrich the Alliance implementation plan with new ideas.

We hope that the Alliance of Civilizations will become a reference framework for States, international organizations, representatives of civil society — whose task we deem to be of crucial importance — and other actors in the sphere of intercultural dialogue. Special but not exclusive consideration should be given to relations between the West and the Islamic world, the need for which has been stressed during our debates yesterday and today. The Alliance would thus constitute a useful tool for crisis prevention and management in that respect.

In the immediate future, and in line with proposals contained in the implementation plan, we believe that there exists a high degree of consensus concerning initiatives suggested within the framework of the Alliance, which we hope will soon come to fruition. Some include the creation of a rapid-response media mechanism in times of crisis; the expansion of intercultural exchanges among young people, who should receive support from specific funds for projects that promote dialogue and tolerance; and the use of mechanisms at the community, regional and local levels for establishing dialogue and preventing and overcoming conflicts.

Spain believes in a past, a present and, indeed, a future replete with diversity and cultural and religious pluralism. We are convinced that such diversity and pluralism constitute one of our major assets, and their integration represents both a national political and a foreign policy challenge.

We are convinced that diversity can be integrated only through dialogue, understanding, respect and tolerance. For that reason, we will muster all of our energy, pragmatically but on a principled basis, to promote actions that are addressed at reconciliation, mutual knowledge and understanding among peoples and societies belonging to different cultures and religions, since we know that this task represents the greatest challenge of our time.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, chairperson of the delegation of Brazil.

Ms. Ribeiro Viotti (Brazil): Brazil welcomes the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I would like to express appreciation to the delegations of the Philippines and Pakistan for spearheading the initiative.

A high-level dialogue on such an important issue is well placed and timely. The sense of a widening gap and lack of mutual understanding between societies and cultures has been a source of heightened concern in recent years. The need to understand that phenomenon and to advance dialogue and cooperation to bridge divides and overcome the threats emanating from them is being increasingly felt. It is only fitting that the dialogue should take place in the General Assembly.

It is timely to highlight the importance of dialogue and diplomacy at a juncture when such powerful instruments could be used to their fullest extent. Such a dialogue would probably show that conflicts usually perceived as motivated by religious and ethnic differences have an underlying source of inequality and exclusion that breed radicalism, fanaticism and violence. Today, such problems mark relations between nations and within societies, regardless of their levels of development.

Extremism should not be allowed to prosper. Violent manifestations of extremism cannot be tolerated or justified on any grounds. However, in order to address such threats, one has to take into account the distressing environment that has often been exploited and exacerbated by extremists in many societies. In some cases, the reality of social exclusion and inequality is compounded by the persistence of situations of domination and injustice that keep peoples and nations from developing the basic conditions for building a dignified and sovereign future.

As a multi-ethnic, multicultural society composed mainly of populations from indigenous, European and African origins, Brazil values the diversity of the human experience. Immigrants from all parts of the world have been welcomed to our country and have enriched our culture with their contributions. Brazilians take pride in such multifaceted origins. A constantly evolving and mutually reinforcing process of dialogue, interaction and exchange among cultures has permeated our social manifestations. Diversity, therefore, is an essential part of and cornerstone upon which our very identity is based.

Brazilians of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths live together in harmony and strive to make the country more socially just and prosperous. In Brazil, we have been resolutely confronting the grave inequalities that have accumulated since the early

stages of the country's development. Public policies have been implemented in recent years to reduce poverty and eliminate hunger. The results so far have been encouraging.

Thus, from a Brazilian perspective, understanding and cooperation among different cultures and religions are not only possible, but also a goal to be pursued. At the United Nations, our best efforts must be devoted to understanding the roots of extremism and to helping promote an environment in which fanaticism cannot thrive. The promotion of cross-cultural and interfaith dialogues such as today's is most useful.

Brazil also strongly supports the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative proposed by the President of the Spanish Government in 2005 and co-sponsored by the Turkish Prime Minister. Within the Group of Friends, we will work with the High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, Mr. Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, to further the goals of promoting understanding and tolerance among different cultures and civilizations.

Cultural liberty implies being able to choose one's identity without losing respect for others or being excluded from other choices in life. People want the freedom to practice their own religion, to speak their own language, and to celebrate their own ethnic or religious heritage without fear of discrimination.

States face a challenge in responding to those demands. If well managed, they will bring greater cultural diversity and enrich people's lives. If poorly managed, they could result in xenophobia, encourage conservative agendas and block the diffusion of new ideas, knowledge and skills.

Globalization is driving increasing interaction among peoples and cultures. That calls for greater respect for diversity, as well as a stronger commitment to universal values and principles, which impart validity to that approach. It is worth remembering the consensus of the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights of 1993:

> "All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated ... While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms." (*A/CONF.157/23, part I, para. 5*)

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Adrian Neritani, chairman of the delegation of Albania.

Mr. Neritani (Albania): May I commend the President of the General Assembly and the co-sponsors Philippines and Pakistan on this important and timely initiative. Indeed, the way world affairs are headed, the question of interreligious dialogue and culture of compromise and cooperation deserves our due attention and action.

Dialogue has always been a key instrument in the process of building peace in the minds of men. Civilizations are inherently intercultural; they have been and continue to be enriched by contacts, exchange, dialogue among peoples and the ability to naturally change and adapt with the passing of time. In that regard, we support the role of the Alliance of Civilizations and other initiatives that further those ends.

Albanians are traditionally tolerant and averse to any form of extremism. The ordinary Albanian grows up in an atmosphere in which religious differentiation is implied. The fact that an Albanian is Muslim, Orthodox or Catholic does not define a demarcation line versus the other. Those and other elements have shaped our innate and natural tolerance. Religious tolerance among Albanians is not a quality developed in modern times or shaped through education and schooling. It is a tradition that originates from the depths of the centuries. The tolerance of three faiths is closely linked with the nation and its existence. It is at the essence and goes to the very heart of our foundation, learned the hard way through life and history.

Tolerance among Albanians is not only religious, but also linguistic and ethnic. The coexistence of three religions in Albania is a peculiar tendency in a region where religion has often been connected to nationalism and where fratricidal wars have been fought in the name of belief. The ethnicization of religion has proved to be bad and dangerous. Wars are enemies of religion, which they distort.

During the past decade or so, the Balkans experienced those miseries, which, combined with nationalistic policies, were transformed into human

tragedies. We sincerely hope that the remnants of those policies and/or politicians or their proxies will come to an end sooner rather than later and let our region naturally prosper and develop, as it deserves to do. Nationalistic policies, cultivated in many cases with a great deal of fanaticism and even ethnic cleansing, are openly opposed to that trend. The willingness to use rhetoric could be better channelled to address issues realistically.

Recognizing the unique case that Albania represents in the domain of interreligious harmony, under the joint auspices of the Director-General of UNESCO and the Government of Albania a Regional Summit on Interreligious and Interethnic Dialogue was held in Tirana, the Albanian capital, a few years ago. The Summit served as a medium for sharing national and regional experiences, defining a framework for cooperation, and identifying concrete initiatives and programmes to the benefit of prosperity, development and, above all, peace in the region at large. On that occasion, heads of State and Government and other participants representing all countries of South-East Europe adopted the Tirana Summit Declaration, which for the first time defined the contribution of interreligious or interfaith dialogue to the broader dialogue.

In Tirana, leaders and policymakers from South-East Europe committed themselves to

> "the education of a new European generation in the spirit of inclusiveness, instilling a feeling of forgiveness instead of hatred, promoting tolerance, understanding and coexistence rather than conflict and violence, reinforcing civic education and observing human rights".

They also situated cultural diversity and heritage as vectors of identity and tools for reconciliation by defining cultural heritage, in both its tangible and intangible forms, as indivisible and embodying the symbolic values of cultural identities. A special appeal was made to capitalize on information and communication technologies and

> "their innate potential to advance freedom of expression, which is the cornerstone of any democratic society and has its corollary in the freedom of the press".

Most importantly, the Tirana Declaration emphasized that

> "[a]ll religious leaders, like other civil society and community leaders, have the potential to exercise a moral and positive influence on how people in society understand each other and interact".

Reconciliation of freedom and equality in our countries and beyond is an effort worth making.

Today, there is growing recognition that interreligious dialogue must be expanded to contribute proactively to social cohesion, stability and mutual understanding everywhere. Religious leaders are called on to reinforce among their congregations and faithful the precepts of dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, in particular the broadly agreed body of commonly shared ethical values. As the Tirana Declaration summarizes the matter at hand, "[r]eligion must not be part of the problem, but part of the solution".

Albania's peaceful religious pluralism is of value to the country, the Balkans and beyond. It is a model of religious coexistence. Although it is tied to ethnic homogeneity, its value has no national borderlines and it is biased towards the values of democratic societies.

The Acting President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Akec Khoc, chairman of the delegation of Sudan.

Mr. Khoc (Sudan): I am greatly honoured to represent the Sudan, my country, in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, which is of great relevance to the Sudan.

I could not agree more with the President of the General Assembly when he stated at the 17th meeting: "We are reaffirming the values enshrined in the United Nations Charter ... and taking concrete steps to advance those values around the world". That need resounded loudly during the general debate and from all corners of the globe. I wish to associate myself with earlier speakers in commending his leadership and the two co-sponsors of this meeting, the Philippines and Pakistan.

In the Sudan, Islam and Christianity have always coexisted and interacted. However, conflict based on control of economic resources, rather than on violence and extremism, has infrequently surfaced in those relationships. Our relationship with neighbouring peoples, cultures and religions has been and is still

founded on dialogue. Given the facility of movement across its borders, the Sudan is a land of diverse cultures and religions from which emerge our strength. The fact that pluralism cannot remain cohesive unless it seeks and remains anchored in cooperation, harmonious dialogue and the culture of peace, stability and security cannot be overstressed. Our geographical location in the Horn of Africa, sharing common borders with nine nations and a tenth across the Red Sea, requires the creation of strong dialogue mechanisms if we are to interact harmoniously with all those neighbours.

There are over 300 cultural groups in the Sudan. Therefore, intercultural dialogue and cooperation have always been at the centre of our relations. However, the changing times of the twenty-first century and cyber and other technologies dictate that such dialogue and cooperation be intensified and scaled up. We need and are exercising them today more than ever.

The Interim National Constitution and other laws derived therefrom defend and promote interreligious dialogue, tolerance, cooperation and respect for religious and cultural diversity. They stipulate citizenship based on a number of rights that sometimes collide with each other. Therefore, dialogue must justly remain the best choice for resolving those and other matters that might interfere with our pluralistic peaceful coexistence.

The conclusion of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the South and the North of the Sudan in January 2005 and other subsequent peace accords added more flesh to the pluralistic dimension. For example, the formation of an almost all-inclusive Government of National Unity, including members professing various faiths and sects within the same faiths, required long sessions of open-minded dialogue, cooperation and tolerance.

At a time of globalization, we cannot remain focused on national actions alone. We must coexist and interact with the greater family of nations and peoples worldwide. We call on all stakeholders, public and private, national and international, to acknowledge the legitimate rights of all peoples to assert their religious and cultural identities through dialogue. We equally encourage all regional institutions to energize their interreligious and intercultural cooperation institutions where they exist or to create them where absent.

I wish to end by reasserting importance of the preamble of UNESCO's Constitution — "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed" — in fostering peaceful coexistence in the spirit of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Alexei Tulbure, chairman of the delegation of Moldova.

Mr. Tulbure (Moldova): At the outset, I would like to underline that Moldova fully subscribes to the statement made on behalf of the European Union by the representative of Portugal, but I would nevertheless add some additional remarks.

It gives me special pleasure to address the participants at the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, and on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Moldova I would like to commend the presidency of the General Assembly and the co-sponsors, the Philippines and Pakistan, for conceiving and organizing this important event.

During our debates, many delegations have reflected on the dialogue among cultures and religious, emphasizing the importance of the peaceful coexistence of nations and praising the value of tolerance and mutual understanding. In our globalized world, peoples, religions and cultures interact and influence one another at a level inconceivable by our predecessors, but crucial to our successors. Therefore, the general commitment to overcoming old divisions, oppositions and confrontations and to establishing and maintaining a genuine dialogue among civilizations based on understanding, tolerance and mutual respect gives hope for the peoples of our global village.

Moldova, a country with a rich and deep-rooted history, culture and traditions, was for centuries a nexus for the interaction of different peoples and cultures, being located on a historic passageway between Asia and Europe. Representatives of diverse ethnic groups, speakers of many languages and followers of different religions found a homeland in Moldova. The population of our multi-ethnic country developed a unique sense of tolerance that became a characteristic of the Moldovan national mentality.

Building on those historic experiences, and integrating the fundamental principles enshrined in the

Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, our Constitution declares Moldova the common and indivisible motherland of all its citizens. The State recognizes and guarantees all its citizens the right to preserve, develop and express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identities.

In 2004, a new law was enacted, adopting the concept of Moldova's State national policy. Tolerance and respect for the languages, cultures, and religions of all ethnic communities living in Moldova were declared an indispensable condition for political sovereignty and civic peace in our country. Moldova declared its determination to build a harmonious multi-ethnic society, based on the principles of ethnic and linguistic liberalism and pluralism.

Freedom of conscience and of religious worship is guaranteed under the supreme law of the country, which stipulates that its manifestations should be in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect. In their mutual relationships, religious cults are forbidden to use, express or incite hatred or enmity. The law forbids and prosecutes all actions aimed at ethnic, racial or religious hatred and incitement to discrimination.

Recently, the Moldovan Parliament adopted a law on religious cults, seeking to modernize Moldovan legislation and to bring it into accordance with international standards, including the European Convention and Protocol for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. In referring to the Council of Europe, let me underline how much we value and look forward to the conclusion of the Council's work on the comprehensive document known as the white paper on intercultural dialogue. The white paper translates the concept of intercultural dialogue by identifying five tasks: developing the democratic governance of cultural diversity; strengthening democratic citizenship and participation; learning and teaching intercultural competences; creating spaces for intercultural dialogue; and developing intercultural dialogue in international relations. We are convinced that this is very important for all of us.

In its recent history, the Republic of Moldova underwent a bitter experience of internal conflict that resulted in the secession and isolation of a part of its territory. Politicians, academic representatives, and researchers from different countries have thoroughly examined the nature of the conflict and expressed their broad concurrence on its absence of religious, ethnic and cultural roots. Regrettably, the economic and political interests of some unscrupulous individuals and groups still cause the separation of families, cultural and religious communities and ethnic groups, denying their basic human rights and hindering the free expression of identities and beliefs.

Conflicts all around the world divert enormous resources and time from our societies and threaten our development. Governments and societies try to settle them, to overcome their legacies and to bridge the gaps between communities, peoples and individuals. While so many different experiences, methods and strategies have been shared from this rostrum yesterday and today, I would like to emphasize once more the importance of education in the promotion of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding.

Education, in particular at school, has a key role in the construction of pluralistic and inclusive societies. However, laws and regulations alone are insufficient for providing education in the spirit of peace and tolerance. It is of high importance to train teachers and to develop textbooks and curriculums that include lessons of mutual understanding, tolerance, the protection of human rights, and knowledge of and respect for foreign cultures, peoples and countries. In that regard, we commend the activities and programmes of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, and other international and regional organizations aimed at promoting peace, tolerance and cultural diversity through dialogue and education.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that my country, Moldova, strongly supports the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. We welcome the appointment of Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as the High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance of Civilizations, and express our conviction that, with the concrete involvement of Member States, we will advance in promoting dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures and religions around the world.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States of the Observer State of the Holy See.

Archbishop Mamberti (Holy See): In an effort, Madame, to meet your recommendation to be brief, my delegation is circulating its written text, and I shall read out an abridged version.

There cannot be peace without understanding and cooperation among religions. There cannot be understanding and cooperation among religions without religious liberty. The safeguarding and promotion of religious liberty for all requires both State action and religious responsibility.

States and international organizations are called on to adhere to and enforce the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and allied international instruments, such as the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

The full exercise of the right to religious freedom is based on respect for human reason and its capacity to know the truth. It ensures openness to transcendence as an indispensable guarantee of human dignity. It allows all religions to publicly manifest their own identity, free from any pressure to hide or disguise it. Religious freedom includes the right to disseminate one's own faith and the right to change it. Respect for religious liberty would unmask the attempts of some terrorists to justify their unjustifiable actions on religious grounds.

If violence continues to arise between religious groups, anti-incitement programmes in civil society should be supported, especially when they are initiated by local groups belonging to cross-religious alliances. Anti-incitement activities include education and the mobilization of religious leaders and mass movements opposing hate speech and other public acts calculated to spur sectarian violence.

Religious minorities do not seek special protection or status so long as their right to religious freedom is fully guaranteed and they are not discriminated against on religious grounds. In fact, they should enjoy the same civil rights as the general population and members of the majority religion — for example, in the construction or repair of places of worship.

Fruitful high-level international gatherings of religious leaders aimed at praying for and promoting peace should be replicated at the national and local levels. Indeed, prayer and good intentions are authentic only if they are translated into practical gestures at all levels. If religions want to build peace, they must teach forgiveness. In fact, there can be no peace without justice, and there can be no justice without forgiveness. Religious communities can also make a positive contribution to peace by educating their own members about their teachings on peace and solidarity.

By promoting interreligious programmes focused on development cooperation, we can also foster dialogue and make significant contributions to peacemaking in societies afflicted by conflict, working with local groups in the areas of anti-incitement, peace and non-violence education, conflict transformation and negotiation.

At a time when the so-called clash of civilizations is gaining currency in some quarters, religions have a special role to play in blazing new paths towards peace, in union with one another and in cooperation with States and international organizations. In order to empower religions to fully assume that role, all of us must work together to ensure that religious freedom is recognized, safeguarded and fostered by everyone everywhere. If this High-level Dialogue is to bear fruit, our message today must go beyond the confines of this Hall to reach and touch each and every person and community of believers throughout the world.

The Acting President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 3369 (XXX), of 10 October 1975, I now call upon His Excellency Mr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Mr. Ihsanoglu (Organization of the Islamic Conference): I will present an abridged version of my statement. The full text will be made available to delegations.

We have been listening with great attention to the general and rich debate that started yesterday on the subject of interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. I have no intention of repeating what has been said by preceding speakers. Rather, I would like to say that there is overwhelming agreement concerning the importance of interreligious and intercultural understanding in peacebuilding and ensuring security and prosperity throughout the world.

We in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) fully agree with that conclusion. We have

expressed our thanks and gratitude to Pakistan and the Philippines, the two sponsors of this highly appreciated initiative. Its subject matter is currently of great concern to the international community and constitutes one of the great challenges for humanity.

It is for the same reason that we have welcomed the idea of the Alliance of Civilizations, which is gaining momentum. We have already committed ourselves to working diligently to ensure its success. Having been involved for nearly 10 years in the issue of the dialogue among civilizations, and having initiated the Dialogue among Civilizations in 1998, the OIC has succeeded in placing this issue on the agenda of the General Assembly. We were also gratified when the Assembly declared 2001 the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations and, to that end, organized many activities and programmes around the world. We are now very satisfied to see that this issue has begun to occupy a prominent place among the major concerns of the international community and to see the rich proliferation of interfaith dialogues. Today's high-level meeting is another manifestation of that importance.

Having said that, we cannot but admit that progress in moving from the phase of debating to that of concrete action continues to be lacking. Very few programmes or projects have found their way to implementation. Even fewer attempts have been made to address conflicts on the basis of the foundations of faith. That is why we firmly believe that interfaith dialogue and understanding should not remain an empty slogan, without substance.

We badly need practical and concrete measures to address this issue, upon which the fate of world peace and security depends. It is from that perspective that we have welcomed the new agenda of the Alliance of Civilizations, which is focused on addressing the issues of youth, education, media and immigration from a practical standpoint. There is no doubt that those issues represent a serious source of friction in international relations.

In the same way, we believe that there is no alternative to dialogue. Dialogue is the only way to achieve understanding. It is indispensable in building bridges as a means of communication between religions and cultures.

It seems to us that there are deficiencies in conceiving of and conducting dialogue. Some among us talk of dialogue for the sake of dialogue and of nothing beyond that. Others speak of dialogue without having any political will to reach a genuine positive result. Some groups do not see the need to practise dialogue on the basis of equal esteem for various traditions and cultures. Others claim to exclusively represent the truth or to be superior to others.

On the basis of those and other considerations, we have found ourselves unable to forge ahead as we had all expected to do. We believe that, if we are to remedy these shortcomings, interfaith dialogue should be aimed not at reaching doctrinal agreements, but rather at increasing sensitivity towards and appreciation of others. Dialogue should also be founded on values shared by all in the contemporary world.

Moreover, the goal of dialogue should be an ethical globalization in which each civilization maintains its identity as a contributor to the creation of a spirit of shared humanity and respect for all.

In the context of ethics, we in the OIC have called for a practical measure to reduce tension regarding one of the thorniest issues facing the world today — that is, ensuring respect for all religions and beliefs. We have suggested that an agreement with legal provisions be discussed and adopted to prohibit the defamation of religions or their sacred symbols. In doing so, we will stem the proactive attempts that poison relations between the adherents of different religions under the guise of freedom of expression.

At a time when many are hailing the spirit of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and the acknowledgement of diversity, many Muslims around the world are experiencing circumstances that are far from celebration or acknowledgement. Wide-ranging hate campaigns and speech campaigns are sweeping across large areas where Islam as a religion is being attacked and denigrated, where Muslims are facing injustice and discrimination. Here I am referring to Islamophobia. Western institutions monitoring Islamophobia in Europe are unanimous in reporting that this phenomenon is on the rise and that a new form of discrimination has emerged based on the hatred of Islam.

I have not evoked this issue as a complaint, but rather to highlight the relevance and importance of our meeting today. When we talk about Islamophobia, we are not dealing with words but with real facts on the ground. I think everybody agrees that the current tense

relationship between the Muslim world and the West, inspired by political, cultural and religious factors, constitutes one of the major threats to peace and security in the world.

In order to address this highly disturbing issue on a political basis as well as on a practical one, I have repeatedly called for the urgent need for Islam and Christianity to agree on an historic reconciliation that would bring the two faiths closer together, eliminate ancient grudges and pave the way for a promising future. A few decades ago, we saw this attempt take place successfully between Christianity and Judaism. In this age of globalization, an historic reconciliation between Islam and Christianity would be an event of resounding historic proportion, and it would affect almost half of humanity. The two great religions of the world cannot afford to let their relationship be defined according to antiquated, antagonistic paradigms. We are confident that if we can only manage to clear this major obstacle, the entire world will be safer, more peaceful and prosperous.

Let us work together to promote peace and social cohesion. Let us endeavour to foster freedom of religion and belief in order to overcome extremism, stereotypes, prejudice, ignorance and indifference. Let us be an instrument of God, of peace and of a limitless ocean of love and harmony.

The meeting was suspended at 6.25 p.m. on Friday, 5 October, and was resumed at 10 a.m. on Monday, 8 October.

The President: I call on Her Excellency Ms. Ruchi Ghanashyam, chairperson of the delegation of India.

Ms. Ghanashyam (India): India is happy to participate in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding. As a country that has historically been a confluence of various religions and cultures, India believes that dialogues of this kind are useful in furthering the message of peace and harmony to which we are all deeply committed.

India has a long tradition of supporting the plurality of beliefs and the individual's right to follow his or her own creed. Freedom of thought and speech is ingrained in the psyche of our nation. It is not surprising, therefore, that all the major religions of the world can be found in our country. Historically, people persecuted on grounds of religion in other lands flocked to India and found safety and freedom to follow their faith. The openness of our society is reflected in the numbers of the largest minority in India, the followers of Islam. With a population of close to 150 million Muslims, India has the world's second largest Muslim population. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others have held the highest positions in the country.

The tolerance of our society emanates from the belief that all paths lead to the same destination. Respect for all religions and cultures is not just a part of our inheritance and cultural heritage, but was regarded as an article of faith by the leaders of our freedom struggle. It is this commitment that resulted in the establishment of a secular and democratic India after our independence. The leaders of modern India remain firmly committed to the ideal of interreligious and intercultural harmony and coexistence.

It is no coincidence, then, that the General Assembly unanimously decided, through its resolution 61/271, to observe 2 October, the day on which Mahatma Gandhi was born, as the International Day of Non-Violence. The first such Day was observed by the General Assembly through an informal plenary meeting last week.

Interreligious and intercultural understanding can be promoted through encouraging a culture of inclusiveness. Democracy and the opportunity for a democratic dialogue make a positive contribution to interreligious and intercultural harmony. Nations that provide equal opportunity to their citizens and where secularism, freedom and democracy reign are particularly well placed to promote harmony among their citizens.

Modern scientific education helps the development of countries and societies. The skills acquired by citizens through modern education enable them to be gainfully engaged in the process of nation-building. Education and development also act as barriers against extremism and fundamentalism. India has a strong tradition of scientific education. Modern India has made great strides in higher education. This effort needs to be replicated in those parts of South Asia where curricula continue to focus on antiquated or divisive tendencies and where large sections of the education system remain devoid of modern systems and precepts, spawning extremism and fundamentalism.

A clear message that this Dialogue should send out should be an unambiguous rejection of extremism and violence. Modern societies cannot and should not tolerate violence. Support by State machinery for extremism, either deliberate or inadvertent, to serve internal or external interests, should be abandoned, and all States should make determined efforts to prevent the spread of extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism.

The Dialogue that is being held on this subject in the General Assembly can be expected to contribute meaningfully and positively to the international efforts to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding only if it proceeds in good faith and without politicization. Attempts to bring in the political agenda through the back door or to use it for short-term political gains undermine the credibility of the effort itself.

India supports all sincere efforts to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding. In this context, we welcome the appointment of Mr. Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as the Secretary-General's High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. We have always been willing to share from our own experience of centuries of living in peace and harmony with a multiplicity of religions and communities.

In our present modern world, we believe that a starting point in the direction of achieving interreligious and intercultural understanding would be for States to enable the development of a culture of inclusiveness and tolerance within their own societies.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Andreas Mavroyiannis, chairman of the delegation of Cyprus.

Mr. Mavroyiannis (Cyprus): Let me begin by saying that Cyprus fully subscribes to the statement made by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal on behalf of the European Union. We welcome this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding, which we consider particularly suited to the United Nations, with its global representativity. We do not view this as an academic exchange of positions; rather, we consider that our primary objective should be to relate the kind of outcome we are seeking through this Dialogue to the purposes and objectives of the United Nations.

Cyprus is proud to have hosted, in July 2006, in cooperation with Malaysia, the second Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue forum, which dealt with the issue of interfaith understanding and cooperation for a peaceful world. The meeting was successful in identifying ways in which people of different faiths can move in harmony and understanding to fruitful and substantial cooperation through a solid and permanent dialogue.

There has been, in recent years, a proliferation of initiatives aiming to further cultural and religious dialogue. We support initiatives that contribute to the codification of collective values that all of us can easily relate to and of which we can claim ownership — without any one culture or religion submerging any other and without seeking cultural homogeneity at the expense of the rich and diverse global heritage that makes humankind so interesting.

We believe that it is only through such dialogue that we can identify the overlapping areas in our respective beliefs, attitudes and habits. Without compromising any elements in our cultures bearing no resemblance to those of others, this convergence is what will allow us to derive what is universally applicable and to use it for the common benefit of humankind. This involves universal objectives, such as the protection of human rights, but also the prevention of cultural misunderstandings that may hinder the maintenance of international peace and security and other tasks central to the mission of the United Nations.

All of that is, of course, subordinate to the unconditional respect we all have towards the other and the absolute right of the other to hold their own views and convictions, regardless of our own views and convictions. This kind of respect also entails the desire for knowledge of the other, the integration of an international perspective in education and media, the dissemination of accurate information about cultures and religions and, ultimately, the awareness of the complexity and historical depth of notions that may initially appear to be incompatible with our own.

Diversity is consubstantial to human nature. The richness of human civilization is, to a large degree, indebted to the dialectical relationship between religions and cultures and the interaction between them in various stages of their history. Through the promotion of this dialogue, we can increase,

throughout the world, individual and collective freedom, enhance respect for human rights and achieve further economic, as well as political, development.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Mohammad Khazaee, chairman of the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Khazaee (Islamic Republic of Iran): At the outset, Mr. President, since this is the first time I am speaking before the General Assembly, allow me to congratulate you on your election to lead this body and to assure you of my delegation's full support and cooperation with you and your Office during your presidency. I would also like to thank you for convening this Dialogue at such a critical time.

We have gathered here to deliberate the important issue of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, as embodied in General Assembly resolution 61/221, of which my country was one of the sponsors. In our view, we need to foster the idea of dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations. It was in that spirit that we held a Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity last month in Tehran.

The present meetings are devoted to discussing two lofty causes: interfaith dialogue and cooperation for peace. I concur with the view that a mistaken perception of religion, resulting in a failure to acknowledge its vibrant role in the individual and social life of humankind, constitutes a dark spot on our contemporary history. Without a doubt, human society needs a new and deeper understanding of religion in order to remove ambiguities and misperceptions created by ill-intended attempts to tarnish the image of divine religions, and also in order to awaken sleeping consciences. Despite strong opposition, religions have not remained restricted to the private realm and have found their way out into the social and public domain.

We also observe that interfaith understanding and dialogue have brought about harmony among different religions, and have gradually entered a new phase, responding to the invitation for cooperation for peace. In our view, this trend demonstrates a historic leap for human society to a higher stage of mental maturity. I very much hope that this right trend results in paving the way for future-leaning interaction among all those who seek peace and believe in the prominent place of religion.

Peace, solidarity and compassion are indeed the principal teachings of Islam and other divine religions; Islam promotes and attaches great importance to dialogue, tolerance and coexistence. Attempts to attribute hatred, terrorism, dogmatism and extremism to Islam and its lofty teachings are, in fact, a despicable ploy to taint the true face of Islam and its divine values. Islam, by meaning and teaching, is a religion of peace, and its holy Prophet is the messenger of mercy, compassion and tolerance.

I am delighted to state that in Iran all followers of the divine religions have lived together in peace and harmony for many centuries. In accordance with our constitution, and based on Islamic teachings and values, all Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians are free to practice their religions. The constitution of Iran has granted the representatives of these religions secured seats in the Iranian parliament. These representatives enjoy the same rights and privileges as their Muslim colleagues. It is thus the principled position of my Government to support all efforts undertaken to promote dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations. In this regard, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran held a dialogue with more than 150 representatives and scholars of Christian and Jewish faith on 26 September 2007 in a church in New York.

By the same token, it is highly satisfying to see that many international and regional meetings have been held to discuss the underlying issues relating to the importance of interfaith dialogue. As we see today, this important item has been included in the agenda of the General Assembly. Support for interfaith dialogue and cooperation for peace by the United Nations and other international organizations, as well as by regional forums, is indeed an asset. At the same time, recognition by the international community of the reality that views emanating from interfaith dialogue will play an essential role in ongoing efforts to build peace burdens us with yet heavier responsibility.

Common efforts undertaken by the followers of religions to spread peace seek a fundamental goal, namely, instilling a sense of responsibility in human society. A successful dialogue aimed at realizing peace depends on making the necessary arrangements to win people's hearts and minds. In this collective effort, all segments of society, including the media and national leaders, should be addressed and invited to take part in bringing about lofty human ideals including peace, justice, solidarity and spirituality. Respect is a

prerequisite for dialogue, and dialogue can be held among those who recognize and respect each other. Therefore, ignorance and humiliation are, per se, detrimental to dialogue. Attempts against a particular religion or culture, especially those made in a recognized manner, run counter to the very purposes of our common agreed principles. The Islamic Republic of Iran, as an initiator of the Dialogue among Civilizations, is more than willing to share its experience with other parties that engage in promoting similar or complementary ideas such as interfaith and intercultural dialogue and cooperation for peace.

At the present time, the unilateral approach to international issues is a bitter reality. Clearly, such an approach does not seek peace; nor does it forgo any acts of coercion or threats to achieve its monopolistic goals. It is prepared to trample on international law and abuse international organizations in order to achieve its goals. Therefore, a strong presence of an international forum dedicated to cooperation for peace, on the basis of religion, is an appropriate response to those who seek to dominate. We earnestly hope that the idea of cooperation for peace will lead to a coalition for peace, as suggested by our President in his address to the General Assembly on 25 September (see A/62/PV.5).

In our view, the exchange of opinions aimed at achieving a common perspective for challenging the hostile approach of certain Powers should figure prominently among our priorities. Fortunately, the peace-seeking approach taken by many States as well as by world public opinion has prepared the ground for realizing this priority. I believe that, despite all odds, we can surmount the obstacle of unilateralism and continue our journey towards peace by relying on faith, determination, patience and more convergence among us.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize the imperative of using the capacity of all existing initiatives for the same purpose of fostering dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations. Certain mechanisms need to be designed and established to complement all the work programmes and action plans. I hope that our efforts aimed at carrying out the historic mission will be crowned with success.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Abderrahim Ould Hadrami, chairman of the delegation of Mauritania.

Mr. Ould Hadrami (Mauritania) (*spoke in Arabic*): I wish to express, through you, Mr. President, the thanks of my delegation to the Philippines and to Pakistan for the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

It is self-evident that the world has become a small, but expansive interdependent village with intertwined scientific, cultural and other interests. This reality means that the international community must act as one united family and cooperate prudently and wisely and make use of the religious, scientific and technological concepts by putting them to good use in the service of humankind. We should not, under any circumstances, accept that situation as a cause for a clash of civilizations and religions.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania conforms strictly to its Muslim faith and calls for dialogue and understanding among all humankind to avoid conflicts and disputes, as was stressed by His Excellency Mr. Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, in his address to the General Assembly at its sixty-second session when said he said that

> "encouraging the spirit and values of understanding, dialogue and complementarity between civilizations and nations, upholding the rule of law and expanding justice and equity are the speediest way to ensure peace and security in the world and eradicate hatred and confrontation between peoples". (*A/62/PV.6, p. 6*)

Islam is a faith of peace and amity. It is regrettable that some parties describe it as terroristic and link it to terrorism. Those who understand the religion and its culture know that the first greeting in the Islamic world is "peace be upon you". That behaviour reflects a civilized manner of living. Islam has never, ever called for extremism or for the renunciation of others. It is a faith of harmony, brotherhood, amity and respect for others.

The blasphemous cartoons and profanity against the Prophet Muhammad and prompt us to use this dialogue as an opportunity to show respect for the cultures and faiths of other people and their sanctified heritage. We call for legislations that prohibits such profanity and such portrayals. We urge Member States to adopt the ideas of the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and

Cooperation for Peace and to incorporate them into the curricula of schools and universities.

The people of Mauritania believe in Islam, but we respect all other religions and creeds. We consider that peaceful coexistence among religions and creeds and cultures would promote international peace, security and cooperation. Distinguished Mauritanian Muslim scholars travel around the globe as ambassadors of amity and peace to promote peaceful coexistence among nations; they participate in many conferences and meetings on dialogue among cultures and religions, in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas to promote peace, understanding and cooperation among all nations, religions and cultures.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Martin Belinga-Eboutou, chairman of the delegation of Cameroon.

Mr. Belinga-Eboutou (Cameroon) (*spoke in French*): By resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2006, the General Assembly decided to hold in 2007 a high-level dialogue on cooperation between religions and cultures. As a sponsor of the resolution, Cameroon welcomes this debate, which comes at the right time. Our world continues to pay a heavy price for its lack of understanding and absence of dialogue. Moreover, in addition to economic inequality, the world's peoples suffer from the ill effects of intolerance and the rejection of the other, which are the root causes of all the violence and the terror in the world.

Intolerance and the rejection of the other are also at the root of all of the fanaticism and religious fundamentalism delivery from monotheistic and other religions — which, however, teach the love of one's neighbour and love of humankind. Such brotherhood is described well by Khalil Gibran:

> "You are my brother and I love you. I love you worshipping in your church, kneeling in your temple, and praying in your mosque. You and I and all are children of one religion ... [the religion of the spirit]".

Truthfully, the idea of interreligious and intercultural dialogue is not new. It is enshrined in the United Nations Charter. It is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is enshrined in the Constitution of UNESCO. The idea had a resurgence following 11 September 2001. That day, the world, in a state of shock, found itself again brutally faced with the classic question of historical philosophy and that is: If we have come this far, then what will our future be, and what can we hope for?

Journalists, driven by the need for commentary dusted off the book of Professor Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. That book tells us that humanity has entered an era of conflicts of a new kind. Wars would no longer be ideological, but civilizational, with countries pitted against each other no longer because of economic or political interests, but because they belong to opposing civilizations. Different civilizations, cultures and religions, we are told, cannot agree on common principles. Thus, they are destined by nature to fight for domination. For that reason, wars of civilizations and wars of culture are inevitable. They can break out within a State between communities which belong to civilizations, religions and cultures that are claimed to be incompatible. They can also set States with different civilizational identities against each other.

That theory drives a culture of the enemy, which is also a culture of fear. Huntington's book very skilfully transforms the fundamental question "What can we hope for?" into "Whom should we fear?". The only goal of such fear is to undermine the existence and the future of multireligious and multicultural societies: we should distrust all of those, within a society who do not belong to the same civilization and we will ultimately find that it is impossible to live with them.

We, the peoples of the United Nations — who had just proclaimed 2000 the International Year for the Culture of Peace and 2001 the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations — had to stand up against that culture of fear and against the globalization of the enemy. On 20 December 2002, by resolution 57/249, the General Assembly proclaimed 21 May the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development. In 2005, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative was launched. So, the international community — the peoples of the United Nations — responded to the clash of civilizations with the Alliance of Civilizations.

Today the peoples of the United Nations are holding this debate, which takes us to the heart of the matter: people must learn again to listen to each other, to accept each other, to accept each other's diversity — in short, to become enriched from their mutual

differences. The same goes for their lives and their survival.

The peoples of the world have a great need to strengthen their ability to listen to each other; societies that differ culturally and religiously but are equal in dignity must listen to each other; the rich must listen to the needs and desires of the poor for a life of greater fairness and dignity and for a more equitable division of the resources of the planet. There is a need to listen to our own history so that together, by understanding the horrors of the past, we will be able to say "never again" and above all, to act accordingly.

Here is a complete programme — a programme that will lead us to ownership of the values of peace, tolerance and dialogue. Actions need to be directed to that end. In terms of education, we need to promote knowledge and respect for others and, in that spirit, to shape the young generations who will be the leaders of tomorrow's world. In families, in churches, in mosques and in synagogues, we must become teachers of peace, human rights and freedom — freedom that respects each and every human being.

In terms of information and communication, we must use the media and new technologies to drive comprehension and dialogue among cultures and religions, to build a culture of peace and solidarity among people and to build a society of ever greater brotherhood to prepare for the coming of what Saint-Exupéry called "La Terre des Hommes".

Lastly, the methods and tools of human sciences must help to define actions aimed at promoting fruitful interreligious and intercultural exchanges.

Those actions are essential, fundamental and vital. The idea of a culture of peace based on understanding between religions and cultures germinates and grows in each individual conscience. It is a fragile seed, but in the heart of the man or woman of peace that value will find fertile ground for germination; a tiny seedling, it can find the air it needs in order to grow in the breath of the man or woman of peace; a delicate flower, it will find the warmth necessary to flourish in the hands of the man or woman of peace. Once it is accepted by the individual, the culture of peace will extend within States and between States. May we, as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has urged, have the strength to progress towards real tolerance and non-violence at all levels, from the individual to the State.

Such tolerance and non-violence, whose value we recognize, are daily practices in Cameroon — a multi-ethnic nation, but a single nation; a multicultural nation, but a single nation; a multireligious nation, but a single nation.

From the mosaic of its peoples and cultures and the mosaic of the religions practised there, we work to consolidate it. E pluribus unum. Yes — from the many, from our great diversity, we shape and derive our unity. Cameroon — which rejects all fanaticism and religious dogmatism, represents the land of syncretism — a message of coexistence, an ecumenical promise of peace.

My country's vision of the dialogue of civilizations is that, in the burning desert of religious, ethnic or cultural passions, all men and women will gather around one point, the oasis of peace, so that together, and by talking with each other, they can build, stone upon stone, stone by stone, stone after stone, the wellhead from which understanding and harmony will bubble up.

Peace is built every day. It is the work of each moment and all moments. Through constant dialogue and through respecting and accepting our differences, we should all ensure that no sandstorm of passions buries that edifice which has been so laboriously constructed.

We have a moral and political challenge to take up: to resist any culture of fear and any globalization of the enemy; we must combat hasty identification. We know with certainty that civilizations and cultures are compatible because they are not monolithic or homogeneous standing in opposition to each other like blocks of identity. For, their identity is made up of what they have brought to one another, of what they have always exchanged, even if it was sometimes painful.

We need to know that the future of civilizations, of cultures and religions is not to be found in a closed, fixed identity. That future lies in the pursuit of those exchanges, in maintaining that uninterrupted dialogue which seeks nothing other than the unity of humanity, open civilizations, open religions, open cultures. We are immortal.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Desalegn Alemu, chairman of the delegation of Ethiopia.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): Allow me, Sir, to join other delegates in congratulating you as President of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session. Allow me also to express our appreciation to the Secretary-General for organizing this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, under agenda item 49 "Culture of Peace".

The promotion of a culture of peace has become the number-one priority of the United Nations and the world at large. Peace no longer means the absence of war, but rather its promotion and strengthening through dialogue and cooperation, with the participation of a variety of actors at different levels of society. Let us recall that in 1998, the United Nations declared the years 2001-2010 the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World and, in 1999, adopted the Declaration and Programme of Action on the Culture of Peace (resolution 53/243).

The world is realizing now that there can be no sustainable development without lasting peace. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is thus all the more critically essential. It is, therefore, the responsibility of each and every one of us to make the world a better place for the next generation by building a culture of peace through accommodation of all interests and of all groups within every society and in the world at large.

Ethiopia is an ethnically diverse country where more than 80 nations and nationalities live in peace and harmony under the aegis and solid guarantees of the federal constitution which ensures their absolute equality and their fundamental rights. It is a country in which the two major world religions, Christianity and Islam, embrace and accommodate each other as a unique, or rare, example of interreligious cooperation and understanding.

In fact, Ethiopia is known historically to have offered safe haven and shelter to Muslims from across the Middle East when they were persecuted in those early times when our country was said to have been part of Christendom. Indeed, not only do Christians and Muslims live in peace and harmony as distinct groups in Ethiopia, but also they intermarry, cohabit and dine together as a matter of common practice throughout most of the country. The ongoing national efforts to build a new Ethiopia in which every citizen is proud of being an Ethiopian — not only by the respect he receives for his specific identity, culture and language, but also by the share of what he receives in terms of the real economic and social wealth of the country — are already bearing promising fruit.

The fast economic and social development now being witnessed in my country is the result of a constitutional regime and policy trends that encourage and ensure equality among all people, particularly among nations and nationalities, religions and beliefs. That is also in perfect harmony with the sacrosanct principle of peaceful coexistence with and mutual understanding among peoples of all other nations, near and far, which Ethiopia respects, and with which, for its part, Ethiopia works hard to foster meaningful cooperation, as enshrined in its federal constitution and in the foreign affairs and national security policies in place now.

It is within the context of the promotion of a culture of peace that the people and the Government of Ethiopia decided to celebrate the Ethiopian Millennium with the whole world. Accordingly, it is to be recalled that by resolution 61/270, under the agenda item on a culture of peace, the General Assembly recognized the year from 12 September 2007 to 11 September 2008 as the year commemorating the Ethiopian Millennium and recognized its celebration as a unique African occasion. We believe that this event is a unique opportunity to create an enabling environment for our country to start its Millennium with the aim of advancing socio-economic and political progress. Furthermore, this event is also aimed at contributing to the advancement of world peace and culture.

It is within the context of this new Ethiopian Millennium that the people and the Government of Ethiopia are determined to make every effort to enable the country to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in cooperation with their regional and international counterparts, and to make poverty a thing of the past. An event that coincided with World Environment Day marked the launch of a national project designed to bolster the new Ethiopian Millennium: Two Trees for 2000. Through that project, every Ethiopian is planting two indigenous trees in an attempt to restore the nation's degraded forest resources.

The Ethiopian Millennium event will continue until 15 months from now, during which time several

projects will be implemented. All projects are designed to renew the commitment of the Ethiopian people in the fight against poverty and backwardness, to build up democratic culture and the culture of peace, and to promote the good image of the country.

Conflict, violence and war remain the major challenges to building a peaceful and prosperous world. Accordingly, the process of attaining durable peace remains without any doubt a daunting task that requires a very strong commitment and the full participation of everyone. It is the number-one priority and an indispensable goal, in order to create a peaceful world for our children and future generations, and to achieve the various development objectives that have been agreed upon. The power is in our hands to make the world a better place. That is why this forum — the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace — under the agenda item entitled "Culture of peace", is crucially important for us all.

The President: I give the floor to Ms. Elena Molaroni, chairperson of the observer delegation of the Council of Europe.

Ms. Molaroni (Council of Europe): In our capacity as Chair of the thematic group responsible for preparing the Council of Europe annual exchanges on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, we would like to deliver the following statement on behalf of the Council of Europe.

The promotion of intercultural dialogue is one of the key missions of the Council of Europe, along with fostering democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Our organization is therefore firmly committed to supporting the initiatives taken by the United Nations and its subsidiary organs and welcomes the holding of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace.

Societies worldwide have to meet the challenges of growing cultural diversity rooted in history and enhanced by the effects of globalization. In Europe, the tasks of securing peace, social cohesion, democracy and respect for cultural diversity have been major policy issues since the Second World War. They are now priorities shared by all 47 States members of the Council of Europe.

Europe is guided by a political philosophy of inclusion and complementarity, full protection of the human rights of everyone, effective democracy and good governance at all levels. We are determined to build cohesive societies by ensuring fair access to social rights, by fighting exclusion and by protecting vulnerable social groups. We are taking resolute steps to adapt our societies to increasing cultural diversity particularly in their social, educational, health and cultural dimensions, because intercultural dialogue will not succeed if we do not address the origins of discrimination and marginalization.

We are resolved to ensure that our diversity becomes a source of mutual enrichment instead of conflict. We are convinced that intercultural dialogue and understanding, together with pluralism and tolerance, are essential tools for mastering the challenge — tools that public authorities at all levels, civil society, religious communities, the media, private enterprise and individuals must learn to use well.

Mahatma Gandhi once said,

> "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

A similarly firm approach to cultural diversity and dialogue also characterizes the attitude and policies of the Governments of our member States. They share the conviction that reconciling cultural diversity and social cohesion can succeed only if we create social trust and base our policy on common values, particularly universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The robust European consensus on those values is demonstrated by the accumulated and increasingly focused instruments of the Council of Europe in this sphere, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights, as well as a long list of other European conventions and recommendations. In a few weeks from now, the Council of Europe will publish a white paper on intercultural dialogue, which will set out in detail the conceptual basis and perspectives of our policy and which we will be glad to share and discuss with the international community.

Part of Europe's rich cultural heritage is a range of religious, as well as secular, conceptions of the purpose of life. Islam, Judaism and all other faiths

represented on our continent, along with the various denominations of Christianity, are important parts of Europe's past, presence and future. The Council of Europe regards freedom of thought, conscience and religion as one of the foundations of democratic society.

Quite frequently, public opinion regards differing religious identities as the real source and trigger of cultural conflict in modern societies. That view is not shared by the Council of Europe. However, religious communities themselves can make substantial contributions to intercultural dialogue and peace; they share the responsibility for promoting mutual knowledge and understanding. The Council of Europe, like other public authorities, must remain neutral in cultural and religious matters. But since our April 2007 meeting in San Marino, we have been encouraging religious communities to engage in dialogue and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law and shall continue to do so in the future.

The Council of Europe is part of a growing group of international institutions committed to intercultural dialogue. We are in close contact with the Alliance of Civilizations initiative and the High Representative of the Secretary-General for the Alliance. We are proud to have a partnership with UNESCO, with which we have agreed to set up the Faro Open Platform, an inter-institutional framework for cooperation in the area of intercultural dialogue. With a number of other institutions — including for instance, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) — we jointly promote practical projects in the areas of education, culture, heritage and youth. We are ready to contribute substantially to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, proclaimed by the European Union.

Those opportunities for cooperation allow us, we hope, to help advance the worldwide discussion on intercultural dialogue and understanding and on the role of religious and other belief communities for peace, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. We are ready to deepen our involvement in that area and to strengthen our practical action, and we look forward to cooperation with many of those present here today.

The President: I give the floor to Mrs. Fiamma Arditi di Castelvetere Manzo, chairperson of the observer delegation of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.

Mrs. Arditi di Castelvetere Manzo (Sovereign Military Order of Malta): The Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta is honoured to take part in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace and would like to express its gratitude to the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines for promoting this very special event.

General Assembly resolution 61/221 recognizes that, respect for religious and cultural diversity in an increasingly globalizing world contributes to international cooperation, promotes enhanced dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations and helps to create an environment conducive to the exchange of human experience.

My colleagues are as aware as I am that in a world where more and more people of different religious and cultural backgrounds are living together it is crucial that social policies encourage religious and cultural interaction in a free, respectful environment. Today, true coexistence between social groups is only possible if everyone shares fundamental ethical criteria and is aware that peace begins from within ourselves.

Our world still suffers from war and armed conflict and is continually wounded by major injustices. The third informal thematic debate on "Civilizations and the challenge for peace: Obstacles and opportunities", held here in early May 2007, was a useful forum for the Order to examine, among experts, how religious differences often worsen the effects of and are used to justify conflicts. Cultural and religious interactions will not survive if we do not respect every single human being. The right to life and to be safe and the dignity of the human person are basic ethical values that must be universally recognized.

It is precisely that awareness that gives the Order of Malta confidence to hold its Christian origin and ethos firmly and positively, while reaching out in service and in membership to people of other religious, cultural and ethnic identities. As underlined by our Grand Master in his address to the diplomatic corps last January, members of the Order experience their faith not as an instrument of evangelization or proselytism but as a way of living in the service of others, of the poor and the sick, in an authentic spirit of

humanity that recognizes the presence of God in the person who suffers, regardless of race, origin or religion.

A prudent and sincere dialogue among different cultures, civilizations and peoples can be carried out only in a space where the fundamental rights of men and women are respected. It is appropriate to recall, in the light of the teachings of the second Vatican Council the two basic reasons for the struggle by the Catholic Church, in close alliance with other Christian churches, for the promotion of human rights, and particularly religious freedom. These are the dignity of the human being and the necessary interpersonal solidarity based on our universal fraternity.

It is noteworthy that the international community has continuously shown interest over the decades in protecting human rights and fundamental liberties, including respect for freedom of conscience and of religion, in major documents such as: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on European Security and Cooperation.

A significant cause of interreligious and intercultural problems which needs to be addressed is the social gap between the rich and the poor. In that area, Governments and religious groups must recognize that development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked. The world's agenda is also the agenda of the world's religions. It is in that spirit that the Catholic Church emphasizes education and agrees with other faiths on promoting the integral development of man and the development of the whole man, according to the famous statement by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*.

We all know that religious and cultural interactions will not bear fruit without a free, respectful and mindful environment and without the awareness that religion is a choice that improves the quality of our lives, not a weapon against our brothers. We welcome the fact that the United Nations has long been involved in the question of the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Far from being the opiate of the people, authentic religion places human objectives in true perspective and stimulates dialogue and respect for basic ethical values that are indispensable to coexistence among peoples.

If the objectives of the dialogue are to be attained there must first be a renewal of attitudes and far-reaching social change. That will require public and private organizations to gradually align themselves with the strengthening and betterment of human qualities and for the protection of human rights. Those organizations must dedicate themselves to be at the service of the dignity and the well-being of men, women and children through safeguarding basic human rights under every political and social system in spite of the considerable effort involved.

It is that sentiment that led the General Assembly to emphasize in resolution 61/221 the need for all levels of society, including the private sector and the media, to become agents for change. That document encourages efforts to strengthen freedom, justice, democracy, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, respect for diversity of culture and religion or belief, dialogue and understanding, which are key ingredients for social cohesion and peace. On our side we must all be aware that there is no path to peace. Peace is the path.

To help individuals to carry out more carefully their obligations towards themselves and towards the various groups to which they belong, they must be carefully educated to a higher degree of culture through the employment of the immense resources available today. Therefore, the Order of Malta commends UNESCO for its efforts in fostering the use of information and communication technologies, such as community radio, newspapers and the Internet, in communities and schools to promote a culture of peace and peace education on issues related to non-violence, mutual understanding and respect. For the more deeply we come to understand the ways of thinking of those who think and act differently from us in social, political and religious matters, the more easily we will be able to enter into dialogue with them.

Above all, we must undertake the training of young people from all social backgrounds if we are to produce the kind of men and women so urgently needed today: men and women who not only are highly cultured but have an open heart and an open mind.

The President: I give the floor to Mr. Michael Schulz, chairman of the observer delegation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Mr. Schulz (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies): Mr. President, the

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) welcomes your initiative to convene this high-level dialogue. We have taken an active part in previous debates on issues relating to the culture of peace, the broadening of understanding, and building respect for diversity. In our view, there is a real and clear need for this debate and for action at the national and local levels.

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which guide the action of our staff and millions of volunteers throughout the world, clearly set out the impartiality, neutrality and humanity of our approach. They also set out the universality of our movement, across countries and communities.

The priorities come from the most basic of human needs. Vulnerability is the key and we do not accept that legal definitions should ever be allowed to be impediments to meeting those needs. The IFRC and its worldwide network of 186 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies make no distinction based on religious or other differences. We, together with our colleagues at the International Committee of the Red Cross invest a great deal of energy in disseminating the Red Cross/Red Crescent Fundamental Principles. In particular, we underline how the principle of impartiality ensures that our work is based entirely on people's needs and not on religious affiliation, ethnic groupings, class or other distinctions.

We are well aware that in recent years there has been a sharp growth in rhetoric — and in some cases action — based on fundamentalist beliefs. In some communities we have also seen misunderstandings about the nature of our humanitarian work and our motives. Concerned by those dangerous trends, the IFRC recently hosted a specialist think tank bringing together representatives of national societies in different parts of the world, the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as several high-level experts in religious dialogue.

The think tank sought to analyse the impact of changing religious manifestations in social and political contexts and the implications for impartial humanitarian organizations such as our own. The think tank also sought to consider how the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement can, in today's environment, better reach its goal of alleviating human suffering and ensuring respect for diversity and non-discrimination.

In consideration of time constraints, allow me to just share four key points. First, organizations and their programmes have to be inclusive and representative of all members of the community. It is essential that all organizations that are committed to objectives surrounding interreligious and intercultural dialogue be themselves composed of the different groups whose dialogue they are fostering. In many communities Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and youth activities provide the forum for people from different walks of life or from different religious or cultural backgrounds to come together to deliver assistance and services to those who need help.

As for the second key point, dialogue needs to be accompanied by action. We speak a lot — as we are doing again today at the United Nations — about dialogue. And dialogue is clearly important. Our experience is, however, much more action-oriented. We know, for example, that to be effective, a health programme must take into consideration attitudes that enable the whole community to participate and benefit. Sometimes the attitudes which have to be addressed derive from religious traditions, and in those situations it becomes imperative to work closely with community and religious leaders committed to addressing vulnerabilities without discrimination.

We also know that dialogue can enable our action. Our experience shows, for example, that addressing HIV in some communities must be accompanied by a dialogue with religious leaders and institutions which can help reach out to the whole community at risk.

Thirdly, there is a need for high-level engagement with Governments, including local government, which we believe have a central role to play. By working with committed community-based partners, including Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Governments can better engage local communities and initiate a process that brings together key actors capable of building mutual respect. Partnership is essential. We know that we need to establish stronger links to religious leaders. We also know that we must undertake a dialogue with influential local personalities, including the media, to emphasize the value of working together in harmony for mutual benefit.

The fourth and the last key point I will make is that existing guidelines are adequate. We see no need for new rules. There are already many useful

instruments in place to guide humanitarian action in this regard. But we acknowledge that improved implementation of already agreed guidelines would be a valuable action in itself. In our case, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief sets important standards in this area. We are convinced that it is a commendable tool for Governments as well.

We will remain closely connected to this debate. We believe that the Red Cross and Red Crescent and its fundamental principles offer a way ahead for other concerned organizations, and we would like to work with the Assembly to that end. An early opportunity to assess the way that partnerships can be built in this area will be the thirtieth International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which will be held in Geneva from 26 to 29 November 2007.

We were pleased to note the Secretary-General's recent appointment of former Portuguese President Sampaio as his High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. We look forward to working closely with him and all others on these issues, as well as with the Special Rapporteur on interreligious dialogue appointed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Assembly can count on the continued commitment of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in tackling these crucial issues together.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Yahya Mahmassani, chairman of the observer delegation of the League of Arab States.

Mr. Mahmassani (League of Arab States) (*spoke in Arabic*): Promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace and strengthening the principles of justice and dignity among all nations and peoples in a world where there is more dialogue, interaction and understanding among all peoples and where technological progress is moving at an accelerated pace requires removing barriers between human beings and making good use of globalization in order to build bridges between religions and civilizations for the benefit of present and future generations. Our efforts today to promote understanding and cooperation among all religions and cultures require the participation of all Governments and regional organizations. In addition, the private sector and civil society institutions must also have a central role in promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue based on the initiatives undertaken by important forums of the United Nations system — including the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, which aims at closing the gap between cultures and religions and at addressing the world's current religious and cultural polarization. That initiative has the support of the Arab League, which has great hopes for the implementation of the Alliance's plan of action. That plan includes a number of important activities that will contribute to bringing cultures closer together.

Promoting dialogue on interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace also requires that we recognize and strengthen cultural diversity at the national and international levels in order to ensure the right of peoples and societies to self-determination and to the preservation of cultural and religious identity on the basis of tolerance, respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue.

In addition, genuine partnership between the United Nations and regional organizations requires dialogue among world cultures and civilizations in the context of a comprehensive strategy that gives a central role to cultures and religions in order to maintain contacts and dialogue among peoples. This must be done on the basis of mutual respect and understanding and the promotion of international peace and security. In the modern age, the imperative of dialogue with others is more urgent than ever. This requires engaging in dialogue under very complex international conditions that, more than ever, call for dialogue among nations to establish new international relations that give priority to the principles of peace, mutual respect and the right to be different. It also requires confronting the doctrines of coercion and dominance.

We live in a time when we cannot ignore the need to give the greatest priority to the issue of interreligious and intercultural dialogue on understanding and cooperation for peace, given the problems afflicting the modern world that cast long shadows over international peace, security and stability. Given the importance of this issue, it must be kept on the international agenda and sufficient time must be devoted to it, in order that all points of view may be expressed. In order to ensure that the dialogue is genuine, effective and positive and has the support of the entire world, it must be based on the principles of equality and the acceptance of others — with all their cultural specificities and attributes — while

respecting their values and eliminating stereotypes and rejecting the dominance of one culture over another. The Alliance of Civilizations is in fact an alliance among all humankind intended to build a better future for all in which there is understanding among cultures and religions and where everyone has an opportunity to live a life of dignity free from attempts to exploit religion to widen the gap among religions and cultures in order to achieve political aims and interests.

The President: We have heard the last speaker in the High-level Dialogue.

Statement by the President

The President: I would like to begin by congratulating all participants on the stimulating discussions that we have had over the past two days. In particular, I would like to thank our panellists and representatives from civil society, non-governmental organizations, faith groups and the private sector for enriching the debate. We must now go forth collectively and strive to build a new culture of international relations based on human rights and security, mutual cooperation and respect for international law. The High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is an important avenue to achieve that goal.

We have already taken an important step in that direction by adopting the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (resolution 61/295). In doing so, we have recognized the inherent value of human diversity. The spirit of cooperation and mutual respect that was displayed during the High-level Dialogue is something that the General Assembly can continually strive to exemplify. As we witnessed during the debate, sincere dialogue is an extraordinary tool to promote inclusiveness. During this session and beyond, we should demonstrate our sincere willingness to tolerate all views, to search for common ground and to avoid using platforms such as this for political purposes.

Globalization has brought us all closer together and has made us aware of religious and cultural diversity. It has also exposed the differences between us. One consequence of this has been to "exoticize" difference. Another has been the exploitation of religion for political ends, often with violent consequences. As one participant noted, "Unless religions are part of the solutions, they will continue to be part of the problem".

Without exception, all speakers recognized that interfaith and intercultural understanding forms the bedrock of our social well-being, stability and prosperity. Diversity is an inherent part of human civilization. Programmes to establish uniformity around a particular ideology, religious or otherwise, have all failed. During the debate we heard many examples of different religious communities that have lived in harmony over the centuries.

Many also noted that intolerance, disrespect and extremism were on the rise and linked this to unresolved international conflicts, social and economic injustice. In this regard, a number of participants called on the international community to do more to find sustainable solutions to conflicts in the Middle East, Darfur, Iraq and Kosovo, noting that lasting peace can be achieved by promoting better intercultural and interfaith understanding.

Many also called for the full and timely implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and the strengthening of human rights institutions. Extremists and terrorists who further their political interests by misinterpreting religion were denounced by all. As well as spreading violence, those groups and individuals also spread ignorance and misunderstanding. Similarly, several delegations also noted the conflation of ethnic identity and national identity or citizenship as a tool used to spread instability for political ends.

The prominent role of mass media was acknowledged as an essential element in promoting greater interreligious and intercultural understanding. In this regard, many noted that there was an important balance to be struck between freedom of expression and the responsibility of the media to respect cultural and religious sensitivities.

A number of delegations have put concrete proposals on the table to address these and other issues. I do not have the time to do justice to all these recommendations now. However, they are recorded in participants' written statements, which will be available on the United Nations website.

I was honoured to open the interactive hearing of the General Assembly, which allowed for an open discussion with distinguished representatives of civil

society, including from non-governmental organizations, academia, foundations and the private sector. I would again like to thank and acknowledge all those who participated in the hearing, in particular for drawing our attention to practical measures to advance interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation. The focus on programmes for youth, media and education, as well as innovative partnerships with the United Nations, coincided with many of the views expressed by Member States. Recommendations such as adapting school curricula and teacher training to emphasize multicultural knowledge and awareness were stressed, as well as increasing opportunities for international student exchange programmes. Another important message, as we approach the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is to promote respectful and inclusive dialogue, especially for minority communities.

I was particularly interested to note the various concrete experiences of successful dialogues on the ground that involved parties, with credibility and trust at the grass roots. Some of these were made possible through effective collaboration with the private sector. Systematically collecting and disseminating these best practices would further our efforts and enhance coordination. I was encouraged by the significant participation of Member States in yesterday's hearing, and welcome the interest of the General Assembly in continuing that meaningful interaction with civil society on this issue and others.

It is clear that there is much more that unites us than divides us. As the chairman of the delegation of Pakistan noted, the Holy Koran says that ethnic diversity is only for the sake of identity. No matter what religion, creed or culture, the human family shares a common yearning for peace, prosperity and happiness. Open and sustained dialogue and respect for freedom of expression and religious belief are fundamental to our endeavour to promote a culture of peace.

Religion is, and should be, a source of inspiration to achieve these goals. No religion has a superior claim to truth. We all need to acknowledge and respect the pluralism of views and beliefs that exist. These values are enshrined in the founding Charter of the United Nations and, if fully implemented, would establish a new culture of international relations based on peace, tolerance and mutual respect.

While the United Nations is an excellent forum for dialogue, we must not stop here. If we want to promote this dialogue, we should go back and spread the message in our communities and neighbourhoods throughout the world. We should all become examples of tolerance and mutual understanding in our daily lives.

If we want the world to change, we must first embody the change that we want to see in the world.

The General Assembly has thus concluded High-level dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, and this stage of its consideration of agenda item 49.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.